

IRAQ'S INTERNATIONAL ACTIONS AS A RESULT OF ITS DOMESTIC CIRCUMSTANCES

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Introduction

The objective of this presentation is to analyse how, since 1980, Iraq's international actions have been the result of its domestic circumstances and of its internal characteristics.

Iraq's leading role undermined by the war

Iraq's rapid economic development, its increased economic ties with the West, and its growing distance from the Soviet Union were all reflected, after 1975, in an increasingly moderate and pragmatic foreign policy. The shift was most noticeable in the Gulf, where relations improved with Iran, with Saudi Arabia, and with the conservative Gulf Emirates.

After a summit of all Arab governments at which only the Egyptian government was not represented, Iraq took the lead by pronouncing the Arab Charter in February 1980 which defined some guidelines for foreign policies. First of all, according to the Charter, Arab countries were to reject foreign bases on Arab soil, mainly American and Soviet bases. Secondly, the member states were to reject the use of force in Arab disputes. It is interesting to note that they voluntarily didn't extend that prohibition to non-Arab disputes. Thirdly, the agreement was calling for Arab solidarity against foreign aggression, mainly coming from Iran and Israel. With cooperation, Iraq gained the chance to play a leading role in a powerful bloc of states including all the Gulf States and Jordan.

But in September 1980, Saddam Hussein's ambitions were halted by the outbreak of the war against Iran. Until that day, Iran-Iraq differences were contained by the 1975 agreement but all changed with the Iranian Revolution. After the Revolution, relations between Iraq and Iran very rapidly became strained. For more than a year thereafter, the tensions mounted and violent incidents became more frequent. Much of the literature on the conflict considers that its origins lie in disagreements over territory, or the profound mutual antipathy that is said to characterise the attitudes of Iraqis and Iranians towards each other. The eight-year war weakened the regional and international position of Hussein and Iraq. Indeed, the war has forced the regime into a position of dependence on other Gulf powers.

Saddam Hussein

One of the great domestic elements that had an influence on Iraq's international relations was without any doubts its dictator. In July 1979, Saddam Hussein, a Sunni Muslim, became Iraq's president. Looking back today at his 22 years at the head of the country, it can be said that one of Saddam Hussein's important features of his rule has been his desire to ensure his total and absolute control over every sphere of political life. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 was felt to be a threat to that absolute control and likely to promote the emergence of pockets of opposition that he was unwilling to tolerate. That threat was not felt by Iraq alone, since there was a common fear in Iraq and Saudi Arabia of Iranian-backed Islamic fundamentalism subverting their own and regional stability. The main factors contributing to the rise of "religious" opposition in

Iran in the 70s were similar in nature and origin to those prevailing in Iraq in 1977, namely the almost total lack of more conventional “political” alternative for the expression of dissent. In the face of such a threat, immediately after the Shah’s fall in late 1979, Iraq’s Interior Minister rushed to Saudi Arabia. And after discussions, Iraq and Saudi Arabia announced a project agreement to cooperate on internal security that could possibly be expanded to a larger Gulf mutual defence pact.

The best example of Hussein’s personal influence on Iraq’s international actions is certainly the war against Iran started in 1980. Given Hussein’s high self-esteem and his belief in the insurmountable economic might of his country, the temptation to launch the war seems to have become irresistible. And given the basic facts of demography and geography, it was surely the greatest folly on Saddam Hussein’s part to imagine that he would ever have been able to defeat Iran.

Internal characteristics

Some characteristics of Iraq’s domestic situation have had a clear influence on its international actions. For example, geographic features and resources unique to Iraq continue to exert a decisive influence on patterns of settlement and human interchange within the state and between Iraq and foreign countries. Iraqi pluralism, embodied in distinct regional economies as well as in numerous cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups that reflect the influence of geography and the area’s historical position as a frontier region, shape the internal and external policies of the Iraqi government. To make mine the expression used by author Christine Moss Helms, Iraq is the eastern flank of the Arab world bordering non-Arab Turkey and Iran, and as such has been considered essential to the strategic depth of the Arab nation, even by non-Iraqi Arabs. In fact, much of Iraqi political behaviour can be understood and anticipated because Iraq is the eastern flank of the Arab world and occupies a frontier position that has aroused strategic concerns and invited human interchange for centuries.

Iraq’s vulnerabilities

Also, Iraq’s frontier position and the fact that it is virtually landlocked give Iraqis an acute sense of their vulnerabilities. This sense has often led to offensive solutions, although Iraqis recognize that good relations between them and their neighbours are valuable if not imperative. As long as oil is the mainstay of the Iraqi economy, Gulf security and Iraq access to the Gulf will be constant sources of concern. Iraq’s acute sense of its vulnerabilities has resulted in an Iraqi centrism that has dominated the priorities of every Iraqi government since the revolution of 1958. No treaty or agreement, whether with neighbours or with the superpowers, that does not effectively address these concerns can be expected to contribute to peaceful relations for long.

Iraq’s perceptions of its internal dynamics and strategic vulnerabilities undoubtedly affect the form and content of its foreign relations. A genuine understanding between Iraq and other states can occur only when areas of overlapping concern are recognized and sensitive Iraqi problems are respected as such by external powers.

Strategic requirements

Some matters have always been of strategic importance for the Iraqi government and they have become conditions for internal stability and development. These strategic requirements include

distribution rights to the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, economic and political integration of the northern Kurdish and southern Shi'i areas within the state, security of oil reserves and facilities, and guaranteed safe passage for trade through the Shatt al-'Arab and the Gulf. No treaty or policy that fails to guarantee these rights can be expected to ensure an attitude of trust or stability in the development of relations between Iraq and its neighbours or with its foreign allies.

Another internal factor that can't be ignored is obviously the presence of an important ethnic group, namely the Kurdish people, that represents 19 percent of the population. When it comes to international relations, it is obvious to conclude that the manipulation by foreign powers of Iraqi interest groups such as the Kurds can hardly win the trust of any Iraqi government or even opposition groups. In fact, if a Western country is to have successful relationship with Iraq, it must be sensitive to the powerful symbols of domestic political and social identification that are employed in the Arab world.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that Iraq's characteristics such as its geography, the presence of an important ethnic group, its economy and the policies of its leader Saddam Hussein, all have some influence on its international actions, to various extents. And one could only conclude that a deep and thorough understanding of Iraq's domestic situation is crucial in order to understand its foreign policies and international relations.

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Bibliography

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C. M. Helms: *Iraq: Eastern Flank of the Arab World* (Washington, 1984)

P. Marr: *The Modern History of Iraq* (Oxford, 1985)

M. Farouk-Sluglett and P. Sluglett: *Iraq Since 1958: From Revolution to Dictatorship* (London, 1987)

Map of Irak



Some dates

- 1975 Iran-Irak agreement in Algiers
Diplomatic relations with Oman
- 1978 Iraq supports pro-Soviet South Yemen
Summit of all Arab governments
- 1979 Saddam Hussein as Iraq's president
Wide variety of Iraq-Jordan agreements
Islamic Revolution in Iran
- 1980 Arab Charter
Beginning of Iran-Irak war
- 1983 Thaw in Iraqi-American relations
- 1988 End of Iran-Irak war
- 1990 Iraq invades Kuwait
Economic sanctions imposed by the UN
- 1991 Iraq driven out of Kuwait
Iraqi intifada
- 1993 Western bombardment of Iraq
- 1996 UN oil-for-food plan established
- 1998 Western bombardment of Iraq
- 1999 Oil exportations limits lifted by the UN