

# Back To Iraq



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## MORE THAN A FEELING

This winter, the drums of war pounded again in the halls of congress. Beginning in February, the US government deployed 200 warplanes and 22,000 combat troops to the Persian Gulf in order to fight a second war with Iraq over its defiance of UN resolutions which prohibit the troubled Middle Eastern nation from producing "weapons of mass destruction." The fuse which ignited the crisis was Iraq suspending American participation in UN Disarmament Inspection teams (UNSCOM) in October and then threatening to shoot down American spy planes gathering intelligence information on behalf of the United Nations. The Iraqi government's stated rationale for doing so was its concern that American members of the team were CIA agents using UNSCOM's information gathering and weapons destruction mandate as an excuse to gather intelligence on Iraqi military strength, much like the aging USAF U2s flying high overhead were doing.

The success rate of the UN's high-tech search-and-destroy mission is used by the world governing body to measure Iraq's compliance with ceasefire resolutions issued after The Gulf War. According to these disciplinary measures, Iraq is subject to an economic embargo which limits the extent to which it can import such crucial supplies as food, medicine, agricultural equipment and high technology. According to variously cited UN figures, anywhere from 575,000 to one million Iraqis have died as a result of suffering created by the sanctions. The deal was that the more Iraq allowed the UN unfettered access to its nuclear, biological and chemical weapons development programs, the more critical resources such as food, medicine and drinking water are supposed to be made available.

The problem is that it didn't work out that way. The sanctions are instead being used to maintain a de facto state of war with Iraq without having to use force to achieve the same results that a full scale military conflict would. After six years of partial compliance with UN demands, Iraq still hasn't even been given a timetable for the lifting of sanctions. Iraq tried to dramatize this point by asking the UN to suspend American participation in UNSCOM activities. The Hussein government wanted to use American participation in the team to highlight how unfairly it had been treated by showing that UNSCOM is unable to function as a neutral entity independent of American military interests.

The bluff worked. Outraged by Iraq's attempt to dictate the inspection team's membership, UNSCOM leader Richard Butler retaliated by removing the entire operation from the country, suspiciously triggering a crisis that brought the world back to the brink of a new conventional war. America immediately began to issue threats of military strikes, much to the chagrin of most of its UN partners. France strenuously objected to taking such measures. So did Egypt. No Persian Gulf nations with the exception of Oman would even grant US aircraft landing rights. And longstanding American satellite Turkey protested the possibility of another conflict because of how it would drive Iraqi Kurds over the border in order to escape the fighting. Russia subsequently intervened, threatening the US with a return to Cold War hostilities if it did not restrain itself. The UN responded by offering Iraq the right to sell more oil to help raise capital to import food and medicine. This proved to be a hollow gesture.

## CAN'T TOUCH THIS

Despite the fact that Iraq holds 1/10 of the world's entire oil reserves, it cannot produce enough petroleum for export to pay its own bills because

it lacks the pumping and petroleum processing equipment to do so. Much of the gear that the country once used to produce crude oil was destroyed—along with the rest of the country's transportation infrastructure and industrial base—by Allied bombing during the Gulf War. Iraq has similarly been prohibited from importing new pumping equipment to resurrect its old pre-war oil producing capabilities. The gear which it currently uses to produce oil is similarly ancient and badly in need of repair. This makes it almost impossible for the country to produce enough oil to approximate the ceiling set on oil production by the 1991 ceasefire accords, let alone produce more oil than what it couldn't produce before.

Oddly enough, at the time that the UNSCOM team suspended its operations in the country, Iraq was in the process of negotiating lucrative new oil field development contracts with France and Russia to restore its pre-war oil production capacity, ostensibly in compliance with the ceasefire resolutions issued by the UN. This would have involved rebuilding Iraq's pre-war oil production industrial base, which the French and the Russians would have been willing to finance in exchange for access to cheap petroleum. Even if Iraq had been allowed to consummate these deals, it remained very unlikely that it would have been able to start producing crude oil for export in any serious quantities for several years because of the time it would have taken to install the equipment and repair damage to wells caused by Allied bombing during the Gulf War.

Nonetheless, if Iraq were allowed to restore its oil producing capabilities, it might once again become the neo-industrial giant that it was prior to invading Kuwait, when Iraq could legitimately claim to be the most highly industrialized nation in the Arab world, using its oil-based earnings to produce everything from cement and agricultural products to conventional, biological and nuclear armaments. It's safe to assume that changes in the world oil market since the end of the Persian Gulf War would prohibit Iraq from becoming a major player in the oil business again. Besides, new producers have since entered the market such as eager to please Azerbaijan, one of the only former Soviet Republics capable of becoming seriously affluent by virtue of its vast, untapped oil deposits. Older oil producing nations such as Saudi Arabia have also become much more wealthy since the war because they have one less serious competitor to contend with.

But oil prices are also at an all-time low. If they drop much further, it would be bad for business. Not long after UN Secretary General Kofi Annan finally brokered an agreement at the end of February that would allow UNSCOM teams unrestricted access to Iraqi weapons production facilities, the world's two largest petroleum producers, Saudi Arabia and Venezuela, agreed that they had both been overproducing, logically resulting in lower oil revenues which could potentially hurt their respective economies. With new future oil giants like Azerbaijan infiltrating the scene, if Iraq had been allowed to reenter the market, under such market conditions they would have depressed oil prices even further and this wouldn't benefit anyone except the sick and starving Iraqis.

## TURN AND FACE THE CHANGE

Things hadn't always been this way. Until Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, its industrial and military strength was seen as an asset to American strategic interests in the Middle East, in a manner very similar to that of Israel, without the common religious cultural bonds that tie both nations together. For eight years, American and European contractors poured bil-





lions of dollars into Iraq's burgeoning oil and defence industries, partially to control its strategic petroleum assets and, partially to use Iraq as a military bulwark against Iran. During that period, American and German firms assisted Iraq in everything from the construction of its oil producing infrastructure to its biological weapons program—much to the chagrin of many German intellectuals who waited until Iraq began firing chemical warheads at Tel Aviv to bemoan the fact that Germans were still guilty of producing chemical weapons used to kill Jews. Iraq only became a threat to American strategic interests after the Cold War, when America needed to develop a new strategic foil to justify expanding its global military dominance once the mighty Russian bear had been vanquished.

If this may appear to be a seriously inconsistent about-face, it is. Given the traditionally inept nature of US foreign policy, it's fair to assume that America did not really rationalize how it could exploit Iraq's invasion of Kuwait for its own purposes until well after it had already happened. Some political analysts have even argued that the State Department gave Iraq the green light to invade Kuwait as a reward for sustaining over 400,000 casualties on behalf of the West during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War. Such conspiracy theories make a certain degree of sense, especially if you consider the fact that Kuwait's oil reserves would have remained just as available to American

religious other have been carefully cultivated by paranoid American conservatives seeking a new scapegoat in the absence of an identifiable Communist threat. The difference with Saddam Hussein's regime is that he's not explicitly religious. Rather, it's that he's a nationalist, and nationalism always means independence from American domination—even when those who resist America are narcissistic, genocidal dictators. But such fine distinctions are lost on the blind American eye. When he can't see an Islamic Mullah in the forefront, he sees one in the back, even when his Arab adversary is wearing a military uniform right out of Woody Allen's *Bananas* instead of the threatening specter of another Ayatollah Khomeini.

Underneath all of the old religious fears which inform American perceptions of Arabs, there are even more base concerns which make us want to dominate them. As usual, it has to do with money—as though any form of racism didn't have an underlying economic rationale which motivated it.

Nothing could illustrate this better than the case that President Clinton made for going to war with Iraq in his February 17th State of the Union address. "This is a time of tremendous promise for America," Clinton states, "Bit by bit the information age is chipping away at the barriers—economic, political, and social—that once kept people locked in and freedom and prosperity locked out." Clinton's optimism is tempered though by a sober sense

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business interests under Iraqi administration as they are under Kuwaiti ownership. The only difference would have been the political identity of the new owners of Kuwait's oil wells: Instead of Bedouin tribal chieftains wearing kaftans and kaffiyehs, they'd be secular Arab nationalists dressed in military fatigues, who still paid lip service to 1960s anti-imperialist rhetoric instead of that of megatrends and mutual funds espoused by nouveau riche desert sheikhs. However, such distinctions in Middle Eastern political cultures have not mattered much to American foreign policy because of its traditional perception of Arabs as an uncivilized, potentially threatening Godless other, whose only value lies in their deep wallets and enormous appetites for sophisticated American military hardware.

#### OLD TIME RELIGION

As Palestinian scholar Edward Said has pointed out again and again, Arabs have no distinct cultural or political identity in American eyes other than as wild eyed, flag burning, bearded adversaries who always need to be kept in line. If they're not making money, they're making bombs and when they're doing neither, it's because they're planning on doing something terrible in the near future such as blowing up financial shopping malls like the World Trade Center. Much of this stereotype has to do with American Christian prejudices against Muslims, and how these old cultural fears of a

of fearful realism that the road less travelled is still fraught with threats and dangers to the new freedoms epitomized by information technologies. "This is not a time free from peril," he states, "especially as a result of reckless acts of outlaw nations... who feed on the free flow of information technology." Bringing the abstraction down to the level of history, Clinton concludes, "There is no more clear example of this menace than Saddam Hussein's Iraq," whose "regime threatens the safety of his people, the stability of his region and the security of all the rest of us." Nothing, of course, could be further from the truth.

Saddam Hussein is a tyrant, but a defanged one who poses more of a threat to his own people than he does to his own neighbors. What's most telling about Clinton's speech is that it suggests more than what Clinton actually says. In viewing the information age as a time when distinctions between classes have the potential to be eliminated, while simultaneously arguing that criminal nations want to derail this process, Clinton projects his own guilt for reinscribing class status among nations on his weak and impotent adversary. In other words, when he speaks about outlaw nation states who seek to take advantage of the new global economic infrastructure, Clinton is really speaking about America. The only difference is that Clinton is unconsciously acting as the voice for its own guilty conscience by admitting American disrespect for the sovereignty of corrupt and tragic nations other than our own. ©

