

Part One

THE 1991 GULF MASSACRE

*The Historical and Strategic Context
of Western State Terrorism in the
Persian Gulf*

Any attempt to properly understand and conceptualize current events in the Middle East, particularly in terms of Western policy in the region, must be based on an understanding of the broad direction of regional Western policy and the matrix of strategic, political and economic interests instrumental in the formulation of policy. In the Introduction, I presented a concise overview of the general principles of Western foreign policy under US leadership. The Middle East provides us with a pertinent illustration of these principles in action. In particular, Western policy in the Persian Gulf, including Iraq, to this day remains part of a wider historic pattern of regional interference designed to secure essentially hegemonic interests.

We therefore begin our study by analysing the historical and strategic context of Western policy in the Middle East in general, investigating the objective and direction of European power in the region during the colonial era, and examining the development of this power into a sphere of primarily American influence. Focusing on modern turmoil in the Persian Gulf, namely, Iran and Iraq, we then move on to discover how the imperial system constituted under European (primarily British) power in the colonial era developed during the twentieth century under US power, leading us to a clear understanding of the basic principles and strategies underlying the international system and the role of Western foreign policy within this system. On that basis, we are equipped to examine one of the most significant modern conflicts of the twentieth century, the 1991 Gulf War, and to unveil how that war arose from the convergence of longstanding patterns and interests vis-à-vis the Western relationship with the Middle East.

The Manipulation of the Middle East

The general tenor of Western interests in the Middle East can be gleaned from various declassified secret documents. In 1945, the United States had explicitly confirmed its desire to maintain control over the Middle East in joint coordination with its partner, the United Kingdom:

[O]ur petroleum policy towards the United Kingdom is predicated on a mutual recognition of a very extensive joint interest and upon control, at least for the moment, of the great bulk of the free petroleum resources of the world . . . US-UK agreement upon the broad, forward-looking pattern for the development and utilization of petroleum resources under the control of nationals of the two countries is of the highest strategic and commercial importance.³²

The long-term implications of such leverage over the Middle East were understood. For instance, two years later, Britain expressly noted that the Middle East was 'a vital prize for any power interested in world influence or domination', since control of the world's oil reserves also means control of the world economy.³³ Accordingly, a 1953 internal US document articulates American aims in the Middle East without ambiguity: 'United States policy is to keep the sources of oil in the Middle East in American hands.'³⁴

Clearly then, the United States aimed to dominate and control Middle East affairs to ensure its monopoly over regional resources, namely, oil. Within this US scheme, it was envisaged

that the United Kingdom would play the role of 'junior partner in an orbit of power predominantly under the American aegis',³⁵ while the other Western European powers would be brought in as collaborators in this process: '[I]t is essential that we should increase our strength in not only the diplomatic but also the economic and military spheres. This can best be done by enrolling France and the lesser Western European powers and, of course, also the Dominions, as collaborators with us.'³⁶ This would be achieved by opposing any movement threatening Western domination of the region, particularly what is referred to as 'Arab nationalism', a term indicating the desire of the indigenous populations to determine their own political and economic destinies, particularly the utilization of their own resources. Thus, in 1958, a secret British document described the principal objectives of Western policy in the Middle East:

The major British and other Western interests in the Persian Gulf [are] (a) to ensure free access for Britain and other Western countries to oil produced in states bordering the Gulf; (b) to ensure the continued availability of that oil on favourable terms and for sterling; and to maintain suitable arrangements for the investment of the surplus revenues of Kuwait; (c) to bar the spread of Communism and pseudo-Communism in the area and subsequently beyond; and, as a pre-condition of this, to defend the area against the brand of Arab nationalism.³⁷

Thus, shortly after the First World War, turning their eyes towards the Middle East, the Western powers aimed to dismantle Ottoman Turkey, which had been the Muslim caliphate for four centuries. The region encompassed by the Ottoman caliphate included and integrated the areas of Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan and much of Saudi Arabia. Islam was naturally the basis of unity of the caliphate, and to counteract this unity the Western powers perpetuated local divisions

among the Arabs. This was achieved by relying on pro-West Arab leaders with local tribal or religious followings to promote the division of the Ottoman Empire. None of these leaders, however, had a claim to popular leadership.³⁸ In particular, Britain invaded southern Iraq as soon as war with the Ottomans had been declared, taking Baghdad in 1917, and Mosul in November 1918.

The plans of how to sponsor uprisings were improvised by British officers in the Arab Bureau in Cairo. According to Sir Arthur Hirtzel of the India Office, British aims were to divide Arabs not unify them. Thus, despite the essential publicized pretences of supporting Arab unity and independence, the British secretly signed the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement with France, thus making official the task of manufacturing small impotent states in the Middle East, and sharing in their control – Iraq in particular was to be carved up between the two colonial powers. The contents of the Sykes-Picot Agreement were revealed in 1921 when the Bolsheviks retrieved a copy. Oil was, of course, a major determinant in the West's creation, division, control and support of Middle East regimes, and this factor was officially recognized in the 1920 San Remo Treaty, and in the illegal 1928 Red Line Agreement, involving the British and French sharing of the oil wealth of former Turkish territories originally under Ottoman rule. Here, percentages of future oil production were allocated to British, French and American oil companies.³⁹

In the aftermath of the war, what remained of the Ottoman Empire was divided among the colonial powers under the mandate system established under the League of Nations (the United Nations' predecessor), by which formerly Ottoman territories were to be governed by the European powers supposedly in the interest of guiding them towards self-government. Britain managed to obtain the mandate for Iraq, even threatening war to

keep the oil-rich Mosul province in the country. The announcement of British mandate rule in Iraq in 1920 led to a widespread indigenous revolt, which was ruthlessly suppressed by British forces. That year, then Secretary of State for War and Air, Winston Churchill, proposed that Mesopotamia ‘could be cheaply policed by aircraft armed with gas bombs, supported by as few as 4000 British and 10,000 Indian troops’. His proposal was formally adopted the next year at the Cairo conference, and Iraqi villages were bombed from the air.⁴⁰

Subsequently, emir Faysal I – who belonged to the Hashemite family of Mecca – was appointed by the British High Commissioner as the King of Iraq. Faysal immediately signed a treaty of alliance with Britain that virtually reinstated the British mandate. To counter the widespread nationalist indigenous protests to this continuation of colonial rule by proxy, the British High Commissioner forcefully deported nationalist leaders, while establishing an Iraqi constitution granting King Faysal dictatorial powers over parliament. Indigenous unrest, however, was intolerable enough to make this state of affairs increasingly unsustainable, forcing Britain to grant Iraq ‘independence’ in 1932 as part of the process of decolonization. The gesture, however, was only token in practice. Britain had already signed a new treaty with Iraq establishing a ‘close alliance’ between the two countries and a ‘common defence position’. With King Faysal still in charge and British bases remaining in Basra and west of the Euphrates, British rule was rehabilitated in an indirect form. However, the Western powers reserved the right to military intervention in order to maintain the regional framework of order established to meet their respective interests. Thus when elements of the Iraqi army and political parties toppled Britain’s puppet King Faysal in 1941, Britain invaded and occupied Iraq again to reinstall Faysal.

This policy in Iraq – which included both the colonial phase

of direct rule and the transition to effective indirect rule under decolonization – was candidly described by Lord George Curzon, then British Foreign Secretary, who noted that what the UK and other Western powers desired in the Middle East was an:

Arab facade ruled and administered under British guidance and controlled by a native Mohammedan and, as far as possible, by an Arab staff ... There should be no actual incorporation of the conquered territory in the dominions of the conqueror, but the absorption may be veiled by such constitutional fictions as a protectorate, a sphere of influence, a buffer state and so on.⁴¹

Curzon had defined in explicit terms the network of surrogate client-regimes – the basic framework of order – constituting the end-goal of decolonization in the Middle East. The Western powers thus succeeded in breaking up the Arab world into several impotent client regimes, an exceedingly chaotic and bloody program that included the literal creation of twelve previously non-existent nations. The arbitrary creation of borders within what was formerly a single empire successfully carved the region into several divided and fragmented nation-states. Iraq was just one of these. In all of these fictional national entities, pro-West leaders were forcefully installed to execute Western instructions. Since the objective of this program included unimpeded access to regional resources (oil) in opposition to the wishes of the populations, it necessarily involved the provocation of force to manipulate the political environment and ensure the establishment of impotent client-regimes whose social and economic administration was subservient to Western interests. This inevitably resulted in the impoverishment and repression of the Arab people under their newly formed illegitimate governments. Due to this program, which involved a series of political, economic and cultural manipulations, these regimes became dependent on the West

for their sheer survival in all significant respects. Policy was unequivocally directed at maintaining the resultant status quo consisting of these surrogate regimes. As one US State Department official stated in 1958: 'Western efforts should be directed at . . . the gradual development and modernization of the Persian Gulf sheikhdoms without imperilling internal stability or the fundamental authority of the ruling groups.'⁴²

This imperial program has been summarized well by the Committee On the Middle East (COME), a Washington DC-based academic body of Middle East experts directed by former Washington representative of the World Jewish Congress Mark Bruzonsky. 'Throughout this century Western countries, primarily the United States and Great Britain, have continually interfered in and manipulated events in the Middle East,' observes COME. The origins of the Iraq/Kuwait conflict can be found ultimately in the historic impact of this interference during the colonial era, namely, 'the unilateral British decision during the early years of this century to essentially cut off a piece of Iraq to suit British Empire desires of that now faded era'. That decision was merely one aspect of a regional policy by which the American and European powers, rather than 'agreeing to Arab self-determination at the end of World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire . . .

. . . conspired to divide the Arab world into a number of artificial and barely viable entities; to install Arab 'client regimes' throughout the region, to make these regimes dependent on Western economic and military power for survival; and then to impose an ongoing series of economic, cultural, and political arrangements seriously detrimental to the people of the area. This is the historical legacy that we live with today.

Throughout the 1930s and the 1940s the West further manipulated the affairs of the Middle East in order to control the resources of the region and then to create a Jewish homeland in an

area long considered central to Arab nationalism and Muslim concerns. Playing off one regime against the other and one geopolitical interest against another became a major preoccupation for Western politicians and their closely associated business interests.⁴³

By thus creating fictional divisions and utilizing existing ones, the West manufactured false states and nationalities, and set them off against each other – meanwhile exploiting all of them. After the Second World War, Britain's global role was on the decline, soon to be replaced by the United States. COME has again described the process aptly: 'After World War II, and from these policy origins, the United States became the main Western power in the region, supplanting the key roles formerly played by Britain and France ...

In the 1960s Gamel Abdel Nasser was the target of Western condemnation for his attempt to reintegrate the Arab world and to pursue independent 'non-aligned' policies. By the 1970s the CIA had established close working relationships with key Arab client regimes from Morocco and Jordan to Saudi Arabia and Iran – regimes that even then were among the most repressive and undemocratic in the world – in order to further American domination and to secure an ever-growing supply of inexpensive oil and the resultant flow of petrodollars.⁴⁴

The pattern of interference and manipulation thus continued under regional US domination. To this day, the Western powers under the leadership of the United States continue to prop up the same illegitimate regimes created in the twentieth century in contradiction to basic humanitarian and democratic principles, to fulfil strategic and economic interests. As the US National Security Council noted in 1958: 'Our economic and cultural interests in the area have led not unnaturally to close US relations with elements in the Arab world whose primary interest

lies in the maintenance of relations with the West and the status quo in their countries.’⁴⁵ Middle East specialist Mamoun Fandy of Georgetown University’s Center of Contemporary Arab Studies elaborates that this attitude is prevalent in the US policy of ‘dual containment’ with respect to two key countries of the Persian Gulf, Iran and Iraq:

Securing the flow of affordable oil is a cornerstone of US Middle East policy. The US strategy of dual containment of Iran and Iraq, designed to ensure that neither Iraq nor Iran is capable of threatening neighboring Gulf countries, is inextricably linked to Washington’s oil policy ... Uncritical US support for autocratic Gulf monarchies and their human rights abuses have weakened both US policy and the oil regimes. It undermines US policy by demonstrating the hypocrisy in American rhetoric about democracy and human rights and weakens the regimes by creating the perception among Gulf subjects that their countries are being ruled in the interests of an outside power.⁴⁶

US policy in the region is, in other words, formulated on the basis of essentially the same interests that were instrumental during the colonial era: access to regional resources by the manipulation of local actors in accordance with Western designs. Indeed, the dire implications of this policy have been harshly criticized by the American academy of Middle East scholars COME:

US policies in the Middle East have for too long been determined by the power and money of special interest groups, as well as by narrow nationalist economic exploitation. This has led to a grossly hypocritical situation in American foreign policy, in dealing with the nations and peoples of the Middle East. While the US Government constantly professes a strong belief and commitment to democracy, human rights, and national self-determination, far too often the same US Government actually

supports tyranny, repression, massive arms sales, despotism, and ongoing subjugation.⁴⁷

Dr J. W. Smith, Research Director of the California-based Institute for Economic Democracy, describes how this strategy was employed systematically not only during the colonial era but all the way through to the post-Second World War period: ‘Once small weak countries are established, it is very difficult to persuade their rulers to give up power and form those many dependent states into one economically viable nation. Conversely, it is easy for outside power brokers to support an exploitative faction to maintain or regain power.’⁴⁸ In doing exactly this in the Middle East, the West established a framework of regional policemen, ‘powers who, for their own interests, will support the regional order preferred by the Western states’, as noted by British historian Mark Curtis. Former US Defense Secretary Melvin Laird described this strategy as follows: ‘America will no longer play policeman to the world. Instead we will expect other nations to provide more cops on the beat in their own neighborhood.’⁴⁹

While Western foreign policy in the late twentieth century is conventionally assumed to have been benevolent in nature, on the contrary, the record of policy in the Persian Gulf illustrates exactly the harsh realities bluntly noted by COME and other experts. The Persian Gulf provides an unambiguous representative case study of this doctrine of establishing surrogate regimes that police the region on behalf of US and Western interests, to effectively extend and rehabilitate the system of imperialism.

Although the ultimate focus of our study is Western policy in Iraq, in the interests of developing a proper understanding of that policy it is essential to situate it in its regional and historical context. This takes us to the preceding crisis in Iran, which was

inextricably linked to the later development of a Western-Iraq alliance. Indeed, in the ensuing analysis we shall find that Western policy in the Persian Gulf, from interference in Iran to intervention in Iraq, has operated consistently to secure strategic and economic interests at the expense of the most elementary principles of human rights and democracy.