

Inventions of the Iran–Iraq War

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These dialecticians, in fact, commit the fallacy of asserting that the enduring thing endures on account of the continuous and contiguous durations in recurring moments, and hence they require an explanation, which is quite simple. We ask them: What is the meaning of those recurring durations?

Omar Khayyam¹

For many years historians of west Asian affairs have preferred to refer to a descriptive reading of international events in the region as if they were trying to define law-like causalities, unchangeable continua or inevitable facts to the multifarious transformations and diversity intrinsic to the ‘Middle East.’ The methods that empower these historians to pursue this mode of analysis are partly engrained in the discipline and partly borrowed from other social sciences with a strong positivistic and empiricist tradition, especially economics, political science, and, albeit to a lesser extent (and perhaps unconsciously), ‘realist’ international relations theories. What has been written about the Iran–Iraq war of 1980–88 is no exception. A quick perusal of the literature reveals three recurrent themes: first, Saddam Hussein seized the favorable international moment that was conducive to a military attack against the newly established Islamic state in Iran (realist, power politics argument);² second, the Iran–Iraq war was inevitable due to the ‘historic’ enmity between the two states (‘orientalist’ argument); and third, the Ba’thist state felt threatened by the spillover of the Islamic revolution and decided to pre-empt further Shia uprisings in Najaf, Karbala, Samarra, Kazimiyah, and Baghdad as a means to contain a Shia resurgence in the greater west Asian area (balance of power argument).³

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¹ Omar Khayyam, ‘Darurat al-tadadd fi’l- ‘alam wa’l-jabr wa’l-baqa’ [The necessity of contradiction, free will, and determinism], in: Seyyed Hossein Nasr with Mehdi Aminrazavi (Eds), *An Anthology of Philosophy in Persia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 406.

² Dilip Hiro stresses the role of the US, arguing that by ‘supplying secret information, which exaggerated Iran’s military weakness, to Saudi Arabia for onward transmission to Baghdad, Washington encouraged Iraq to attack Iran’; see his book, *The Longest War: The Iran–Iraq Military Conflict* (London: Grafton Books, 1990), p. 71.

³ This justification was rather more central to the Iraqi efforts to legitimate the invasion: By interfering in the internal affairs of Iraq, it typically was argued, Iran had broken the terms of the Algiers Agreement; see, for example, Majid Khadduri, *The Gulf War: The Origins and Implications of the Iraq–Iran Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), especially Chapter 8.

The challenges to those established arguments, which I would like to express in the following paragraphs, are aimed not so much at dismissing what has been discovered by students of west Asian affairs *in toto* but rather at dissecting some of the regularities that have been accepted too readily. The object, to be more precise, is to present the ‘regime of thought’ that precipitated and sustained the Iraqi invasion of Iran by ‘contextualizing’ the empirical facts about the war with a narrative that appreciates the impact of norms, images, institutions, and other invented cultural artefacts on international crisis situations.⁴ To that end, I move in two directions. In the first section of this article I suggest that the Ba’thist leadership in Iraq made its decision to launch a full-scale invasion of Iran within the inter-subjective context of Iraqi–Arab nationalism, its anti-Iranian precepts and the regime’s internalized self-perception as the indispensable pan-Arab force in the region. What has been largely undervalued in the literature about the war, I suggest, is that the invasion was precipitated by a fundamental dialectic: On the one hand, the ideational manufacturing of the Ba’thist garrison state and its anti-Iranian precepts; on the other hand, the reification of this identity by regional states and the wider international community. I am conscious that some readers may argue that an *a posteriori* historical account of the events surrounding the Iran–Iraq war (and other major international events for that matter) always carries the risk of someone committing that most deplorable of intellectual sins, historical revisionism. However, those readers will find that I have rendered useful empirical material that was not available at the time when the ‘official’ history of the Iran–Iraq war was written. And I have embedded this material in a set of questions that allude to complementing facts about the way the war was produced, but not in order to reveal competing, all-encompassing causalities, or as a means to search for a new history of the conflict, or to proclaim a return to a more comprehensive ‘science’ of the Iran–Iraq war in particular and organized violence between political units in general. Rather, my ambition is much more modest: I am interested primarily in showing that collective, socially engineered, and continuously reified cultural inventions came into play when Saddam Hussein decided to invade Iran. It is this inter-subjective *kriegskontext* that I will attempt to bring into focus. I will refrain from a descriptive reading of the Iran–Iraq war; instead I will start from a set of questions about the way perceptions, enemy images, and ideologies are constituted.

Invention#1: The Persian Enemy

A long-standing hypothesis put forward by cognitive and social psychologists claims that cultural constructs, such as norms, institutions, values, etc., are accessible to the extent that they have been activated and reified by previous knowledge.⁵ ‘Abundant evidence for this’ it is argued ‘comes from experiments in which researchers manipulate whether participants are exposed to a word or image related to a construct (a *prime*) and then measure the extent to which the participants’ subsequent interpretations of a stimulus are

⁴ In terms of international law, the United Nations belatedly settled the question of who started the war its report of 9 December 1991 (S/23273), which—only after Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait—refers to ‘Iraq’s *aggression* against Iran.’

⁵ See J. S. Bruner, ‘Going beyond the information given’, in University of Colorado, Boulder, Department of Psychology (Ed.), *Contemporary Approaches to Cognition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), pp. 218–238.

influenced by the primed construct.’⁶ I have attempted to differentiate the emergence and determining imprint of culture elsewhere, suggesting a four dimensional dialectic: (1) it is through externalization that culture is a human product; (2) it is through objectification that culture becomes a reality *sui generis*; (3) it is through internalization that agents are products of culture; and (4) it is through introjection that culture constitutes the identities, interests and preferences of agents.⁷ Culture thus understood has a life cycle: It is both a producer of mindsets and world views and a product of the same phenomena. It should become clear to the politically minded reader that the state has a pivotal interest in that socially constructed sphere, because it is the main locus where we tap into knowledge, where we find our place in society, where we draw the boundaries between ourselves and the enemy without and where, ultimately, militaristic ideologies habituate us to the expectation of war.

‘[T]he indispensable condition of war’ Gordon Allport argues,

is that people must *expect* war and must prepare for war before, under war-minded leadership, they make war. It is in this sense that ‘wars begin in the minds of men . . . personal aggressiveness does not itself render war inevitable. It is a contributing cause when people *expect* to vent their emotions in warfare. Similarly the alleged economic causes of war are effective causes only when people think war is a solution to problems of poverty and economic rivalry. Otherwise they are not. What men expect determines their behaviour.’⁸

Allport refers to a ‘psychology’ of war that affects our thinking about the enemy. Sociologists would add that written and spoken texts are the most important kind of cultural artefacts in the transmission of those salient enemy images. Exposure to texts activates implicit theories in the mind of the agent by triggering relevant knowledge and affecting changes in the mindset in the direction of the internalised ideological content of the text. Hence the importance of studying the writings of intellectuals who as a group of individuals have the power to constitute ‘truth conditions’, as a legitimating system, as authoritative discourse, who can disqualify competing views from emerging and counter-narratives from questioning the status quo. Contemporary social psychologists agree:

Both the informal texts of ‘low culture’ (e.g. folktales, television, commercials) and the more formal texts of ‘high culture’ (e.g. religious tracts, canonical works of literature) are capable of conveying and reinforcing conceptions of agency.⁹

⁶ Ying-yi Hong, Michael W. Morris, Chi-yue Chiu, Verónica Benet-Martínez, ‘Multicultural Minds: A Dynamic Constructivist Approach to Culture and Cognition,’ *American Psychologist*, 55, 7 (2000), p. 711.

⁷ See Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, ‘Islamic utopian romanticism and the foreign policy culture of Iran,’ *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 14, 3 (2005), pp. 265–292; Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *The Question of the Islamic Republic: Selected Essays on the Politics of Post-revolutionary Iran* (forthcoming).

⁸ Gordon W. Allport, ‘The Role of Expectancy’, in Leon Bramson & George W. Goethals (Eds), *War Studies from Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology* (London: Basic Books, 1964), p. 179.

⁹ Michael W. Morris, Tanya Menon & Daniel R. Ames, ‘Culturally Conferred Conceptions of Agency: A Key to Social Perception of Persons, Groups, and Other Actors,’ *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 5, 2 (2001), p. 173.

Here, the latter aspect of culture, that is the perpetuation of myths through cultural introjection, was rather more central to the production of the Iranian enemy image in Ba'athist Iraq. Mythic narratives are particularly deterministic and functional in perpetuating and reproducing the boundaries between 'the' identity of the state and 'the' identity of the enemy. The Ba'athist leadership soon realized that the fact that Arabs and Iranians have shared long periods of common history on both sides of the Shatt-al-Arab required a systematic effort to invent strict boundaries between the 'Iranian other' and the 'Iraqi-Arab self.' Central to this political strategy was the accentuation of the 'racial' composition of Iran, which was pursued by referring to the country as Persia.¹⁰

In order to legitimate the Ba'athist campaign against Iran and Iraqis of Iranian origin historically, the challenge of 'the Persians' was projected back to the reign of the Persian king Cyrus, who gave refuge to the Jews when they were persecuted by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar in sixth century BC. The myth was invented that there has been a perennial conflict between Arabs and Persians, and that the 'backstabbing Iranians' had a history of collusion with Zionists and imperialist forces against the 'Arab nation.' This was the central argument of two books published in the early 1980s, *Al-Madaris al-Yahudiyya wa-l-Iraniyya fi-l-'Iraq* (Jewish and Iranian Schools in Iraq) by Fadil al-Barrak; and *Al-Harb al-sirriyya, khafaya al-dawr al-Isra'ili fi harb al-khalij* (The Secret war: The mysterious role of Israel in the [First]Gulf War) by Sa'd al-Bazzaz. The former deals with the 'destructive' and 'dangerous' impact of Jewish and Iranian schools on Iraqi society. The latter outlines how Israel and Iran conspired to combat Iraq, with special reference to the destruction of the nuclear reactor in Osirak by the Israeli Air Force in June 1981.¹¹ Describing Iranians as *ajam*, an inferior people within the dominance of Islam, which was deemed to be first and foremost an Arab domain, the Ba'athist state also disseminated overtly racist propaganda, exemplified by pamphlets such as Khairallah Talfah's, *Three Whom God Should Not Have Created: Persians, Jews and Flies*, serials entitled *Judhur al-'ada al-Farsi li-l-umma al-'Arabiyya* (The Roots of Persian Hostility toward the Arab Nation), and proverbs such as *Ma hann a'jami 'ala 'Arabi* (An *ajam* or Persian will not have mercy on an Arab).¹² According to Ba'athist state propaganda, hatred toward Arabs was an integral part of the Persians' destructive mentality (*aqliyya takhribiyya*), which was deemed a racial attribute that had not changed since the days when Islam came into the Sassanian empire in the seventh century.¹³ In a survey about the image of Iranians in Arab schoolbooks, Talal Atrissi provided further evidence for that anti-Iranian disposition:

The image of the Iranians (Persians) in the Iraqi schoolbooks is clear-cut... The Iranian is always that mean racist Persian who conspired against the Arab nation, its unity and its language, as well as the Islamic Arab civilisation, since the era of the Orthodox Caliphs and until 'Saddam's glorious Qadisieh' [Iran-Iraq war].

¹⁰ See further Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *The International Politics of the Persian Gulf: A Cultural Genealogy* (London: Routledge, 2006).

¹¹ Ofra Bengio, *Saddam's Word*, p. 137.

¹² The term *ajam*, often used in a pejorative sense, originally identified the non-Arabs (particularly the Iranians) peoples of the Muslim Empire. During later periods the term acquired an ethnic and geographic designation to distinguish Arabs from Iranians.

¹³ Bengio, *Saddam's Word*, pp. 142–143.

Each time the Persians are mentioned they are the invaders, an absolute evil that has to be deterred, being a constant danger that threatens the [Arab] nation and its fate. All the problems of Muslims and Arabs, all the sectarian conflicts and unrest, as well as the attempts to undermine their civilisation, may as well be, if we are to rely on these books, the product of Persian conspiracies.¹⁴

The legacy of the rivalry between Iranian and Arab versions of nationalism was even more dramatic in relation to the nomenclature of the Gulf. In 1977, the Iraqi Revolutionary Command Council established an 'Arab Gulf Office', under the direction of Saddam Hussein. The designation of the waterway as the Persian Gulf by Iran, it was argued, testified to the country's historic dream of regional hegemony.¹⁵ Indeed, Iranian nationalists often conflated the historically evolved designation of the waterway as the Persian Gulf with 'natural' cultural and political pre-eminence in the area. This was especially acute during the rule of the Pahlavi dynasty, whose insistence on Iran's pre-Islamic heritage fostered the myth that the Gulf has been a Persian lake ever since the Achaemenian kings Dariush and Cyrus established the first Iranian world empire. It is no wonder then that the 'Arab Gulf Office' in Iraq was established in 1977, during a period when state-sponsored nationalism dominated the state identities in both countries. By confronting imperial Iran on the basis of the naming of the Persian Gulf, Ba'thist Iraq wanted to assert its status in the region and counter the chauvinism of Pahlavi nationalism. Likewise, by disseminating maps designating that body of water as *Khaliji Basra* (the Gulf of Basra) or *al-Khalij al-'Arabi*, Iraq claimed a prominent role in the region by appealing to (Iraqi-centric) Arab nationalist and anti-Iranian sentiments. Indeed, that the campaign to rename the Persian Gulf (initially popularized by Jamal Abdul Nassir of Egypt in the early 1960s) was at least partially successful, suggests that aversion to the Iranian presence in the region transcended the confines of Iraqi state propaganda and was, to a certain extent, shared by other regional states as well.¹⁶

The invention of the anti-Iranian norm constituted an integral institution of the state identity of Ba'thist Iraq. The Iranian revolution itself was thought to be part of a long history of Iranian efforts to dominate the Persian Gulf. The Ba'thist regime even described Ayatollah Khomeini himself as an infidel (*kafir*) and heretic (*taghut*), unfit to preach Islam which was portrayed as an exclusive domain of the Arab peoples. In order to foster the 'Islamic credentials' of the otherwise secular regime, the Ba'thist state increasingly reverted to Islamic symbols and imagery. Central to this task was the decision to refer officially to the Iran-Iraq war as *Saddam's Qadisiyya* or *Qadisiyyat Saddam*, projecting two central institutions of Ba'thist Arab nationalism: the romantic mystification of the leadership ideal on the one hand, and suspicion and antagonism toward Iranians on the other hand.¹⁷

The phrase, which was to be used in any official Iraqi correspondence, likened the war to the battle of *Qadisiyya* in AD 637. During that battle the armies of Sasanian Iran, led by General Roustum, were fighting as a Zoroastrian-Persian force and were defeated by a

¹⁴ Talal Atrissi, 'The Image of the Iranians in Arab Schoolbooks,' in Khair el-Din Haseeb (Ed.), *Arab-Iranian Relations* (Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies, 1998), p. 155.

¹⁵ Bengio, *Saddam's Word*, p. 140.

¹⁶ Adib-Moghaddam, *The International Politics of the Persian Gulf*.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Muslim army under the command of Saad bin Abi Waqqas. The defeat led to the capture of the Sasanian capital Ctesiphon (its ruins are near Baghdad), causing the ending of Sasanian suzerainty in Iraq and opening up ancient Iran for the ensuing process of spreading Islam. Iraqi intelligence documents captured after the Second Persian Gulf War suggest that Saddam Hussein's identification with a comparable historical role and the regime's anti-Iranian disposition were indeed systematic.¹⁸ While most of the documents refer to the Iran–Iraq war as *Qadisiyyat Saddam*, Iranians consistently are referred to in derogatory terms as the 'Zionist Persians, *al-'adu al-ajami* (the illiterate or foreign enemy), *al-'adu al-Irani* (the Iranian enemy) or *majus* (fire worshippers). The official terminology is consistent with other institutional manifestations of anti-Iranianism and its invented linkage with the history of Iraq and the character of Saddam Hussein. Iraqi history books, for instance, gave the following explanation for the naming of the war as *Qadisiyyat Saddam*:

It is the everlasting heroic epic that the Iraqi people fought to defend Iraq and the Arab nation; it is the battle in which the Iraqi people achieved victory against the racist Khomeinist Persian enemy. It was named Saddam's Qadisieh [*sic*] after the victorious, by God's Will, leader Saddam Hussein, who led the marvellous heroic battles . . . just as leader Saad bin Abi Waqqas did in the first Qadisieh [*sic*] about 14 centuries ago.¹⁹

Invention #2: The Eastern Flank of the Arab World

The effort to historicize Iraq's war campaign was not sudden or merely in response to the revolution in Iran, for it was not only power politics that propelled Saddam Hussein to demonize Persia. Arab nationalist activists have singled out Iranians as a main source of resistance to the pan-Arab idea, at least since the writings of Sati Khaldun al-Husri and Michel Aflaq.²⁰ The reification of this norm permeated the state identity of Ba'thist Iraq and reached all the way down into the terminology and symbolism of the state. In turn this suggests that anti-Iranianism was as much an ideological (utilitarian) tool to delineate the Iraqi–Arab self from the Iranian–Shiite other, as it was firmly rooted in the belief system of the Ba'thist leadership: both power politics and inter-subjective perceptions constituted Iran as *the* enemy. In other words, by attacking Persia, the regime not only wanted to produce itself as the pre-eminent force in west Asia, but also it acted on the premise of a

¹⁸ After the Second Gulf War, Iraqi-Kurds operating in the semi-autonomous northern no-fly zone forwarded thousands of documents from the Iraqi intelligence's four primary agencies, including the *al-Amn al-Khas* (Special Security), *al-Amn al-'Amn* (General Security), *al-Mukhabarat al-Amma* (General Intelligence) and *al-Istikhbarat al-'Askariyya* (Military Intelligence), to the US government. They are available on the pages of the Iraq Research and Documentation Program at the Center for Middle East Studies, Harvard University, <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~irdp/>

¹⁹ Quoted in Atrissi, 'The image of the Iranians in Arab Schoolbooks', p. 161.

²⁰ Both Aflaq and al-Husri were instrumental in the institutionalization of the pan-Arab idea in Iraq. The former—who had founded the Ba'th party in the 1940s—because of his decision to side with the Iraqi Ba'th of Saddam Hussein against the Syrian Ba'th of Hafiz al-Assad in the early 1970s, the latter because of his educational posts between 1921 and 1941.

deeply embedded resentment of Iranian cultural and political outreach in the region and beyond. To clarify, I am suggesting that this tactic was not only an act of political utilitarianism (or a matter of power politics) in the sense that it suddenly was invoked to rally the support of Arab states in reaction to the exogenous effects of the Islamic revolution, but also its system effects (i.e. the effects of the revolution in Iran) were interpreted and processed against the background of a pre-existing, deeply embedded 'paranoia' about Iranian expansionism. At no stage during the tumultuous early days of the revolution was the fragile Islamic Republic in a position to launch a full-scale invasion of Iraq or to coordinate a systematic covert war as the shah had done in collaboration with the United States and Israel in Iraqi Kurdistan during the early 1970s. It was not the objective threat from Iran that propelled the Iraqi state to launch the invasion. Iraqi perceptions were framed by Ba'thist Arab nationalism and its misperceptions about Iranian designs in the Persian Gulf. The Ba'thist 'mindset' signalled to Iraqi decision makers that the Iranian revolution might turn into an irrevocable campaign aimed at 'Persianizing' the Gulf. According to that perception, the revolution was only one effort in the long line of Iranian strategies to master the Arab world. Before Iraq would turn its attention to Palestine, the country would rid the Arab states once and for all from that historical challenge to the 'eastern flank of the nation.'

The disposition of Saddam Hussein's Iraq during the time when the decision for the war is thought to have been made (according to Ofra Bengio, in April 1980) was encapsulated in Khairallah Talfah's writings. 'Many People say that Palestine must be dealt with first,' Talfah argued. 'That is true—and yet I say: Iran is a dagger in the heart of the Arabs, therefore it must be removed so that the Arabs can regain their health... As the old proverb has it: 'He who lives with us is the worst thief.'²¹ Thus, while Zionism and Western imperialism were distant threats, and dealing with them needed careful, long-term planning, Iran was perceived as the perennial, immediate 'enemy from within.' With the international climate conducive for war, Ba'thist anti-Iranianism broke the border between political self-introjection and action. Kanan Makiya agrees, valuing the effects of Iraq's Ba'thist state identity higher than the effects of Iranian threats or purely economic or territorial cost-benefit calculations:

Qadisiyyat Saddam captures a mood that prevailed in Ba'thist circles at the start of the fighting, a mood that had nothing to do with rancour over possessions, competition for economic assets, greed for territory, or alleged Iranian intentions. The regime was brimming over with self-confidence... it was armed to the teeth and capable of those great things that were given to it by 'history' and everything that the pan-Arabism of the Ba'th stood for. The time was ripe for the Ba'th to take externally the kind of decisive action they had already taken internally, to signify to the outside the rising preeminence of Iraqi Ba'thism in regional and Arab affairs. Ba'thist motives were singularly political, derivative ultimately from deeply held ideological tenets to which they had given ample proof of their commitment.... [E]conomic, material, and strategic benefits... come afterwards.²²

²¹ Quoted in Bengio, *Saddam's Word*, p. 145.

²² Kanan Makiya, *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq*, updated edition with a new introduction (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 270–271.

Recently declassified US State Department documents and the 'Duelfer Report' presented by US Chief Arms Inspector in Iraq, Charles Duelfer, provide further evidence for the Ba'athist paranoia about Iran. Consider a meeting in 1988 between representatives of the US construction company Bechtel and Saddam Hussein's son-in-law Hussein Kamil (at that time Minister of Industry), where Kamil stated that the US Senate was controlled by Zionists who were responsible for undermining US–Iraqi relations 'since Iraq had defeated their Iranian ally and was now defeating their Kurdish surrogates in northern Iraq'.²³ Anti-Iranian (and anti-Jewish) rhetoric hence was not employed merely to rally support among Arab nationalists. Kamil was addressing representatives of an American conglomerate with close relations to the Israeli state and who were perhaps indifferent to Iran. In such a discursive context it does not make sense to accuse Iran and Israel of conspiring, other than a genuine belief that this is really the case. The Duelfer report confirms the centrality of the 'Persian menace' to Ba'athist threat perceptions: 'From Saddam's viewpoint' the author argues, 'the Persian menace loomed large and was a challenge to his place in history'. Moreover, the report suggests that Iran (not the United States) was the 'pre-eminent motivator' of Saddam's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program. 'All senior level Iraqi officials' the interrogations revealed 'considered Iran to be Iraq's principal enemy in the region.'²⁴ Indeed, this obsession with Iran can also be discerned from Saddam Hussein's comments during the war-crimes trial against him. He would take responsibility 'with honour' for any attacks on Iran using conventional or chemical weapons during the 1980–1988 war, he proclaimed on 18 December 2006, a week before his lawyer's appeal of the death penalty was rejected by the Iraqi high court. Hussein even blamed 'Iranian agents' (and the United States) for the death penalty itself.

Research into the social construction of reality by cultural theorists and social psychologists reveals that human's construct their own realities.²⁵ This idea is not, of course, a new one; it used to be, for instance, the central philosophical tenet of the Muta'zilitic school of Islam (literally those who withdraw themselves)—the eighth century Muslim 'social constructivists' who advocated contextual analysis of the *Quran*. Moreover, research beyond the social sciences supports the idea that ordering the environment and by extension inventing 'realities' is a natural function of human behaviour.²⁶ Steering toward the discipline of international

²³ Cable, US Embassy Baghdad, to US Department of State (DOS), 'Minister of Industry Blasts Senate Action,' 13 September 1988, page 2. I am drawing on the set of documents obtained by the National Security Archive (NSA) at George Washington University under the US Freedom on Information Act. See, for example, 'Saddam Hussein: More Secret History', 18 December 2003, <<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB107/>> [accessed 22 February 2005].

²⁴ Comprehensive Report of the Special Advisor to the DCI on Iraq's WMD, 30 September 2004, <http://www.cia.gov/cia/report/iraq_wmd_2004/transmittal.html> [accessed 21 January 2005]. The report also revealed that Saddam Hussein used the United Nations-managed Oil-for-Food program to provide millions of dollars in subsidies to the Iranian opposition group, the Mojahedin-e khalq Organization (MKO), which is listed as a terrorist organization both in the EU and the United States. The MKO is led by Maryam and Massoud Rajavi and has a political wing that operates under the name 'National Council for Resistance in Iran,' the armed military wing, based in Iraq until 2003 but disarmed and confined to one base by the US military since, launched several terrorist attacks inside Iran between 1988 and 2002. See Michael Isikoff and Mark Hosenball, 'Shades of Gray: The Duelfer report alleges that Saddam gave funds to a listed terror group, but the claim does little to advance the White House case for war,' *Newsweek* (13 October 2004).

²⁵ See especially Peter Berger & Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Anchor Books, 1966); and George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1934).

²⁶ Lawrence A. Hirschfeld & Susan A. Gelman (Eds), *Mapping the Mind: Domain Specificity in Cognition and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

relations we may add that invented realities that engender motivational drives toward war appear to be especially pronounced within totalitarian political systems where the institutionalisation of pluralistic discourse atrophies under the pressure of ideological introjection. In the case of Ba’thist Iraq, anti-Iranianism had been reified to the extent that it had acquired the quality of an immanent, autonomous reality, reacting back on its creator.²⁷ Acting within this self-consciously chosen ‘ideational habitat’, Saddam Hussein was alienated from objective reality, ignoring that the reality guiding him had been produced by himself; the subject was assimilated into the object and followed the signals of external, reified norms, institutions and structures. That Saddam Hussein tailored his actions according to this ‘alien reality’ three times (against Iran, Kuwait, and the United States), only reiterates the salience of the ideational belief system that framed the existence of the Ba’thist polity and explains its gross misperceptions during the three Persian Gulf wars.

Invention #3: The Ba’thist Garrison State

Research by ‘social constructivists’ in the discipline of international relations suggests that perceptions, representations of reality and identities are not constructed in isolation. States are not operating in encapsulated habitats. It is not possible to act decisively on a specific identity without perceiving a minimal degree of external recognition.²⁸ Neurophysiological research suggests a comparable pattern, hypothesising that *visions* caught by the eyes are transformed into *perceptions* by the coordinated firing by millions of neurons all over the brain. This physiological process enables us to ‘link’ the invented category ‘grandmother’ to the mother of our mother and fill that category with meaning accumulated through previous interaction with that person.²⁹ In other words, we make sense of our environment through processes of physiological and social *interaction*. Applied to the inter-subjective context of Iraqi Ba’thism, this idea suggests that the Ba’thist leadership constituted its war role in *relation* to international society. The Iraqi state perceived itself as the main agent of pan-Arabism at least since the Ba’thist coup in 1968. That this subjective self-understanding was not confirmed during a period when the Iranian–Saudi dual pillar order was systematically legitimated (by the United States and the Gulf monarchies) prevented Iraq from playing a rather more prominent regional role in the 1970s. Revolution in Iran altered that constellation. In the reshuffling of regional relations, the way the Iraqi state viewed itself was approximated by the way it was addressed. Indeed, it can be argued that Iraq became the agent for containment of the revolution because of two reasons: it felt legitimated in its self-perception as the leader of the Arab world and it was confirmed as the suitable vehicle to preserve the regional status quo.³⁰

What may be termed the ‘social engineering’ of the Iraqi war role has not been made explicit in the literature about the causes and consequences of the Iran–Iraq war. Cannot

²⁷ See also Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, ‘Islamic Utopian Romanticism’, p. 268.

²⁸ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 227.

²⁹ David Berreby, *Us and Them: Understanding your Tribal Mind* (London: Hutchinson, 2005), p. 104.

³⁰ Many arguments about the causes of the Iraq war merge on this point, without, however, making the link between Iraqi state identity (under Saddam Hussein), external confirmation and the decision to launch the invasion explicit. See among others Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 231; and Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Gerd Nonneman, *War and Peace in the Gulf: Domestic Politics and Regional Relations into the 1990s* (Reading: Ithaca, 1991), p. 39.

Iraqi state identity, external confirmation, and the decision to go to war also be related causally? It appears to me that Saddam Hussein was convinced that military confrontation with Iran would be tolerated because the international community did not suggest otherwise; external signals were interpreted as a green light—if not *carte blanche* by the government elites. Does not the fact that Saddam Hussein managed to organize the high degree of political, economic, and media support both in the Arab worlds (apart from Lebanon, Libya, and Syria) and in the Western hemisphere suggest that the anticipation of the Iraqi regime was at least partially accurate? If we would affirm that question for one moment, does it not suggest that the signals before the war must have been quite strong indeed? I think that the Iraqi war role was socially engineered in that it existed only *in relation to* the international system. To be more precise, the Ba’thist state could not have acted on its war role without its real and perceived reification by international society. Having investigated the first process of this dialectic, that is the constitution of the Iraqi-Ba’thist self-perception, I now turn my attention to its reification by international actors, regional and global.

Invention #4: Saddam’s Gulf Credentials

The Gulf monarchies already had reacted positively to the tactical moderation of Iraqi behavior in the period after the signing of the Algiers agreement in 1975. Diplomacy followed suit: in February 1979, Saudi Arabia and Iraq signed a security agreement that committed Iraq to defend the former in the case of war. The agreement was accompanied by high-level diplomatic exchanges between the two countries and between Iraq and Rais al-Khaimah (one of seven shaykhdoms comprising the United Arab Emirates) Oman, and Kuwait.³¹ From the perspective of Saddam Hussein, the recognition gained from the diplomatic exchanges was reason enough to believe that an invasion of Iran would be supported. Some commentators even speculate that the decision to take military action gained approval beforehand.³²

The minimal argument that can be put forward is that regional states signalled that an invasion of Iran would be accommodated. Apart from Dubai and Sharjah, which continued to have cordial relations with the Islamic Republic, the five other shaykhdoms in the United Arab Emirates as well as the other Gulf monarchies were involved either directly or indirectly in the Iraqi war effort, especially after the failure of the Iraqi *Blitz* and the Iranian counteroffensive into Iraqi territory in 1982. For example, among the various measures that they undertook, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait agreed to forward the profits of oil production in the Khafji oil field, located in the neutral zone between Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, to the Iraqi government;³³ the two countries provided Iraq with loans ranging from an estimated US\$35 billion to US\$50 billion, most of them not necessarily meant to be repaid;³⁴ both countries opened up their ports for the shipment of products bound to the Iraqi market and the selling of oil on behalf of the Iraqi government; and the Saudi state

³¹ Ehteshami and Nonneman, *War and Peace in the Gulf*, pp. 39–43.

³² Ibid. p. 43; see also Bahman Baktiari, ‘Revolutionary Iran’s Persian Gulf Policy: The Quest for Regional Supremacy’, in Hooshang Amirahmadi & Nader Entessar (Eds), *Iran and the Arab World* (London: Macmillan Press, 1998), p. 74.

³³ Saideh Lotfian, ‘Taking Sides: Regional Powers and the War’, in Farhang Rajaee (Ed.), *Iranian Perspectives on the Iran-Iraq War* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), p. 18.

³⁴ Shahram Chubin & Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1988), p. 154.

arguably even offered to finance the rebuilding of the Iraqi nuclear reactor in Osirak, destroyed in a pre-emptive strike by Israeli warplanes in June 1981.³⁵

The particularities of support for the Iraqi war effort may be disputed, but the regional disposition to take sides never was at issue. The sketch of regional collusion with Iraq provided here should not mislead, however, for the support was not unequivocal. Concurrent with the quasi-alliance of Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia with Iraq, the regional states were engaged continuously in containing the economic calamities and military spillover of the war. Apart from sustained efforts to appease Iraq, they also refrained from formalizing their relationship with Saddam Hussein. Indeed, the six states on the Arabian Peninsula littoral of the Persian Gulf established the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in early 1981, soon after the war had started, and left out both Iran *and* Iraq.

Yet, viewed from the perspective of the Iraqi regime, the support of the country's war efforts was seen as a boost to its claim to regional power—and more specifically—its self-bestowed role as the leader of the Arab world. The external confirmation and support from regional states was processed against the background of the Arab nationalist and anti-Iranian precepts of Iraqi Ba'hist state identity. From that viewpoint, supporting the war effort was considered only 'natural'—indeed the only logical response of Arab states against the threat to the eastern flank of the Arab nation. 'All Gulf countries are aware of Iran's ambitions in targeting them', Saddam Hussein argued in a typical manner. 'They know that had it not been for Iraq, they would have been taken as prisoners to the lands of the Persians'.³⁶

Invention #5: Saddam the Benevolent Leader

Since the ouster of the Iraqi monarchy in 1958, no Iraqi leader had enjoyed more international support than Saddam Hussein did during the war with Iran. There was even a strange fascination with the persona of Saddam Hussein himself within some diplomatic circles in Britain and the United States, especially in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In a telegram to the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, for instance, the then British ambassador to Baghdad described Hussein as a 'serious character' with an 'engaging smile' which 'seemed part and parcel of his absorption with the subject in hand and not, as with so many of the others, a matter of superficial affability. 'I should judge him', the ambassador went on, 'to be a formidable, single-minded and hard-headed member of the Ba'hist hierarchy, but one with whom, if only one could see more of him, it would be possible to do business'.³⁷ Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, Alfred L. Atherton, Jr., appeared to have a comparable fascination with the character of Saddam Hussein in 1975. In a conversation with Henry Kissinger as part of a routine review of world events, Atherton described Hussein as a 'rather remarkable person' who is 'running the show' and is 'a very ruthless and pragmatic, intelligent power'.³⁸

Thus, Saddam Hussein already had been singled out as somebody who 'we can make business with' before he launched the invasion of Iran. During the war his international

³⁵ Lotfian, 'Taking Sides', p. 19.

³⁶ Chubin and Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War*, p. 153.

³⁷ Telegram from British Embassy Baghdad to Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 'Saddam Hussein,' 20 December 1969, Public Record Office, London, FCO 17/871, p. 4; and NSA, *op. cit.*

³⁸ 'Secretary's Principals and Regionals Staff Meeting,' 28 April 1975 (Excerpt), p. 22, NSA, *op. cit.*

credentials were enhanced further by the then ruler of Jordan, King Hussein, who repeatedly acted as an intermediary between the Ba'athist regime and the United States, especially during periods of diplomatic crisis. A declassified cable from the US Embassy in Amman to the US State Department dated 19 March 1985, that is at a time when Iraqi chemical weapons attacks against Iranian soldiers and civilians already were well known, shows King Hussein's systematic efforts to enhance the international reputation of Iraq while fostering pan-Arab cooperation with Egypt. Symptomatically, King Hussein indicates to the then US ambassador in Amman that the Iraqis were 'very pleased' with American diplomatic support 'and with their overall cooperation with the US.'³⁹ In another cable dated 28 March 1985 and summarizing a meeting between King Hussein, Hosni Mubarak, and Saddam Hussein, it is stated that 'so long as Saddam was ruling the country, Iraq would continue on its present pragmatic course,' which was believed would be true 'even after the war ended.'⁴⁰

The reassuring international context before and after the invasion of Iran contributed to Saddam Hussein's ability to claim the right to go to war (*jus ad bellum*) and to avoid the right conduct of the war itself (*jus in bello*), even though international society condemns military aggression and the canons of international law provide some degree of protection against war crimes (at least formally).⁴¹ In the case of Iran, the first international reaction to the conflict is emblematic for the pattern of behavior that followed: After six days of hostilities, on 28 September 1980, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 479, calling for an immediate cessation of hostilities without, however, naming Iraq as the invading force, or calling for the country's withdrawal from Iranian territory (the call to return to internationally recognized boundaries came only after Iranian advances into Iraqi territory as a result of the counter-offensive in mid-1982).⁴² In essence then, Resolution 479 and the final Resolution 598 adopted after nearly eight years of fighting were similar with regard to the question of who started the war. Both failed to name Iraq as the invading party.

There was also calculated accommodation with regard to Iraqi chemical and biological warfare against Iran. Complaints from the Iranian side were made as early as November 1980. Yet, it took the international community, including the most prominent non-governmental organizations (NGOs), at least three and one-half years to investigate the allegations systematically.⁴³ The Stockholm International Peace and Research Institute (SIPRI) testified to that in May 1984:

Three and a quarter years [after the first Iranian complaints in November 1980], by which time the outside world was listening more seriously to such charges, the

³⁹ Cable from US Embassy Amman to DOS, 'Hussein on Mubarak's Visit and Their Joint Trip to Iraq,' 19 March 1985, p. 3, NSA, *op. cit.*

⁴⁰ Cable from US Embassy Baghdad to DOS, 'Views of the Jordanian and Egyptian Ambassadors on Iraq: the War, the Peace Process, and Inter-Arab Relations,' 28 March 1985, p. 3, NSA, *op. cit.*

⁴¹ See, for instance, Richard Sorabji & David Rodin (Eds), *The Ethics of War: Shared Problems in Different Traditions* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

⁴² Sir Anthony Parsons, 'Iran and the United Nations, with particular reference to the Iran-Iraq war', in Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Manshour Varasteh (Eds), *Iran and the International Community* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 16 and 18.

⁴³ See also Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, 'The Whole Range of Saddam Hussein's War Crimes, *Middle East Report*, 36, 2 (Summer 2006), pp. 30-35.

Iranian Foreign Minister told the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva that there had been at least 49 instances of Iraqi chemical-warfare attack in 40 border regions, and that the documented dead totalled 109 people, with hundreds more wounded.⁴⁴

The SIPRI report also indicated that after visiting several hospitals in Tehran, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) confirmed that ‘substances prohibited by international law’ were employed during hostilities (7 March 1984). This in turn also was confirmed by the United Nations in the same month, with a report by the Secretary General, condemning the use of chemical weapons. Again, however, Iraq was not named as the perpetrating party.⁴⁵ During the period of the ‘tanker war’ and the ‘war of the cities,’ the same pattern toward both Iraqi modes of warfare and the identification of the invading force could be observed.⁴⁶ Even the final UN Security Council Resolution 598, which ended the hostilities after being accepted by both Iran and Iraq, only deplored ‘the use of chemical weapons’ and merely determined ‘that there exists a breach of the peace as regards the conflict between Iran and Iraq’, and hence refrained from naming Iraq as the guilty party.

The regional and global complacency toward Iraq’s mode of warfare, including the employment of chemical and biological weapons, confirmed the impression of the Iraqi regime that it have been granted a ‘free ride’ role, creating the paradox that by using Iraq to strangle the Islamic revolution in the cradle, the cooperative norms and institutions of international society itself were rendered useless, manipulated to function according to the overarching *leitmotif* to prevent Iranian advances. In turn, this compromised the authority of the international community to act as a restraining force during the war, exemplified by this intercepted communication by Saddam Hussein’s cousin Ali Hassan al-Majid, called ‘Chemical Ali’ after the *al-Anfal* (spoils of war) campaign against Iraqi Kurdish militia and Iranian forces operating in the Halabja area between February and March 1988:

Jalal Talabani asked me to open a special channel of communication with him.⁴⁷ That evening I went to Suleimaniyeh and hit them with the special ammunition. That was my answer. We continued the deportations [of the Kurds]. I told the *mustashars*⁴⁸ that they might say that they like their villages and that they won’t leave. I said I cannot let your village stay because I will attack it with chemical weapons. Then you and your family will die. You must leave right now. Because I cannot tell you the same day that I am going to attack with chemical weapons. I will kill them all with chemical weapons. Who is going to say anything? The international community? F them! The international community and those who listen to them.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Julian Perry Robinson & Jozef Goldblat, ‘Chemical Warfare in the Iraq–Iran War’, *SIPRI Fact Sheet*, Chemical Weapons I. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (May 1984).

⁴⁵ Parsons, ‘Iran and the United Nations’, p. 19.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 19–20.

⁴⁷ Leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), a group that the Iraqis referred to as *Ulama Iran* (agent of Iran) because of its collusion with Iran in the latter periods of the war.

⁴⁸ Kurdish tribal leaders of paramilitary units officially referred to as *Qiyadet Jahafel al-Difa’ al-Watani* (National Defence Battalions) by the Iraqi regime and derided by other Kurds as *jahsh* or ‘donkey foals’ because of their alliance with the state.

⁴⁹ The Ali Hassan al-Majid tapes were obtained by Human Rights Watch (HRW) after the 1991 Persian Gulf War and have been published as Appendix A to HRW’s Report, ‘Genocide in Iraq. The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds’, <<http://www.hrw.org/reports/1993/iraqanfal/>> [accessed 23 March 2006].

Invention #6: Saddam the US Ally

It has been documented that from the outset of the war the US government provided Iraq with intelligence information about Iranian force deployments and movements collected by the US Airborne Warning and Control Aircraft (AWACS) that had been stationed in Saudi Arabia but were operated by the Pentagon.⁵⁰ There is compelling evidence suggesting that, after the end of the 'hostage crisis and the change of US administrations from Jimmy Carter to Ronald Reagan (January 1981) as well as Iranian advances on the battlefield, intelligence sharing was complemented with diplomatic, financial and military cooperation.⁵¹ On the diplomatic front, the United States followed an active policy of reconciliation with Iraq, removing the country from the State Departments list of 'state sponsors of terrorism' in February 1982, followed by the official resumption of diplomatic ties in November 1984. Economic support ranged from authorization of dual use equipment, such as the sale of helicopters that could be converted to military use, and generous loans provided by the US Export-Import Bank (Eximbank) and other financial institutions. In a speech presented to the US House of Representatives, Henry Gonzalez (D-Texas) outlined that '[b]etween 1983 and the invasion of Kuwait in 1990, Iraq received \$5 billion in CCC [US Department of Agriculture's Commodity Credit Corporation] guarantees that allowed them to purchase United States agricultural products on credit.'⁵²

In October of the same year, hearings before the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs revealed that the United States not only had exported agricultural products to Iraq, but also 'chemical, biological, nuclear, and missile-system equipment . . . that was converted to military use in Iraq's chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons program', and which in turn also were used against US soldiers in the Second Persian Gulf War.⁵³ The results of these hearings were compiled as the Riegle Report in May 1994. According to this report, the US government had approved sales of a wide range of chemical and biological materials to Iraq,⁵⁴ including components for mustard gas, anthrax, *Clostridium Botulinum*, *Histoplasma Capsulatum*, *Brucella Melitensis* and *Clostridium Perfringens*.⁵⁵ The official 'tilt' toward Iraq

⁵⁰ See further Adam Tarock, *The Superpowers' Involvement in the Iran--Iraq War* (Commack: Nova Science Press, 1998), p. 61.

⁵¹ See the NSA Electronic Briefing Book No. 82 (25 February 2003), 'Shaking Hands with Saddam Hussein. The US Tilts toward Iraq, 1980-1984', Joyce Battle, ed. <<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB82/index.htm>> [accessed 13 March 2006].

⁵² US House of Representatives, Speech by Henry B. Gonzalez: 'Bush Administration Had Acute Knowledge of Iraq's Military Industrialisation Plans' (27 July 1992) <<http://www.fas.org/spp/starwars/congress/1992/h920727g.htm>> [accessed 21 January 2004].

⁵³ US Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs (7 October 1994). Committee Staff Report No. 3: Chemical Warfare Agent Identification, Chemical Injuries, and Other Findings. Principal Investigator James J Tuite III: 'US Chemical and Biological Exports to Iraq and their Possible Impact on the Health Consequences of the Persian Gulf War', <<http://www.chronicillnet.org/PGWS/tuite/chembio.html>> [accessed 14 March 2006].

⁵⁴ For Saddam's international suppliers see Adib-Moghaddam, 'The Whole Range of Saddam Hussein's War Crimes'.

⁵⁵ See US Senate, 103rd Congress, Second Session (25 May 1994) a Report of Chairman Donald W. Riegle, Jr. and Ranking Member Alfonse M. D'Amato of the Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs with Respect to Export Administration: 'The Riegle Report. US Chemical and Biological Warfare-Related Dual Use Exports to Iraq and their Possible Impact on the Health Consequences of the Gulf War,' <<http://www.gulfweb.org/bigdoc/report/riegle1.html>> [accessed 12 February 2005].

actually was defined in a State Department Information Memorandum dated 7 October 1983; it concluded that the 'policy of strict neutrality has already been modified, except for arms sales, since Iran's forces crossed into Iraq in the summer of 1982,' adding that the 'steps we have taken toward the conflict since then have progressively favoured Iraq.'⁵⁶ The range of US assistance to Saddam Hussein was confirmed by former National Security Staff Member Howard Teicher in an affidavit to a US district court in Florida:

Pursuant to the secret NSDD,⁵⁷ the United States actively supported the Iraqi war effort by supplying the Iraqis with billions of dollars of credits, by providing US military intelligence and advice to the Iraqis, and by clearly monitoring third country arms sales to Iraq to make sure that Iraq had the military weaponry required. The United States also provided strategic operational advice to the Iraqis to better use their forces in combat. For example, in 1986, President Reagan sent a secret message to Saddam Hussein telling him that Iraq should step up its air war and bombing of Iran. This message was delivered by Vice President Bush who communicated it to Egyptian President Mubarak, who in turn passed the message to Saddam Hussein. Similar strategic operational military advice was passed to Saddam Hussein through various meetings with European and Middle Eastern heads of state where the strategic operational advice was communicated.⁵⁸

From the perspective of Saddam Hussein, the US 'tilt' was a confirmation of his elevated regional role. During the various diplomatic encounters, Iraqi officials gave repeated attention to inter-Arab politics (the situation in Lebanon, Syrian expansionism, the reintegration of Egypt, the Israeli-PLO 'peace process', etc.), presenting Iraq as the pivotal power in the Arab world at the expense of Syria and Libya whose leaders were described as radical, revisionist, and irrational. The Iraqi Ba'thist regime in turn was presented as moderate, pragmatic, modern, without ideological 'complexes,' and acting 'within the context of five thousand years of Mesopotamian civilisation.'⁵⁹ Due to the reawakened historic weight of Iraq under the leadership of the Ba'th party, it was argued, the country's role as a force for stabilization was indispensable: 'What... would have happened to the states of the Gulf and Arabian peninsula,' Saddam Hussein asked during a meeting with Donald Rumsfeld in Baghdad in December 1983, 'if Iraq

⁵⁶ DOS, Bureau of Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs Information Memorandum, Jonathan T. Howe to Lawrence S. Eagleburger, 'Iran-Iraq War: Analysis of Possible US Shift from Position of Strict Neutrality', 7 October 1983. NSA, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

⁵⁷ This is a reference to a National Security Decision Directive signed by Ronald Reagan in June 1983 and was co-authored by Howard Teicher and another NSC staff member, Geoffrey Kemp. The content of the NSDD and even its identification number remain classified.

⁵⁸ US District Court (Florida, Southern District) Affidavit. 'United States of America, Plaintiff, v. Carlos Cardoen [et al.]' [Charge that Teledyne Wah Chang Albany Illegally Provided a Proscribed Substance, Zirconium, to Cardoen Industries and to Iraq], 31 January 1995. Teicher also stated that the CIA encouraged Iraq to use cluster bombs against the Iranian 'human wave' attacks. NSA, *op. cit.*, pp. 3, 4, respectively.

⁵⁹ US Embassy in Italy Cable from Maxwell M. Rabb to the DOS, 'Rumsfeld's Larger Meeting with Iraqi Deputy PM [Prime Minister] and FM [Foreign Minister] Tariz [Tariq] Aziz, 19, 20 December 1983. NSA, *op. cit.*, page 3.

had not stood fast [against Iran]? No one would have been able to put out the fire. Zionism was in fact encouraging it to burn.⁶⁰

Nothing convinced Saddam Hussein more of his newly acquired regional primacy than the international silence about the use of chemical and biological weapons. In a State Department memo to then Secretary of State Shultz in November 1983, it was confirmed that the US knew 'that Iraq has acquired a CW production capability, primarily from Western firms, including possibly a US foreign subsidiary' and that it appears that Iraq uses chemical weapons almost on a daily basis.⁶¹ Further intelligence suggested that 'as long ago as July 1982, Iraq used tear gas and skin irritants against invading Iranian forces quite effectively' and that 'in October 1982, unspecified foreign officers fired lethal chemical weapons at the orders of Saddam during battles in the Mandali area.'⁶²

Before Donald Rumsfeld returned to Baghdad in late March 1984 for a second official visit, the United States, for the first time during the war, had condemned the use of chemical weapons publicly.⁶³ Yet, while acknowledging that the 'United States has concluded that the available evidence substantiates Iran's charges that Iraq has used chemical weapons,'⁶⁴ the press statement also condemned the Iranian insistence on the removal of the Ba'hist regime. This statement is historically interesting when viewed from the comparative perspective of events that have surrounded the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003, because the US government in 1984 named Iran as the invading force, declaring, the 'United States finds the present Iranian regime's intransigent refusal to deviate from its avowed objective of eliminating the *legitimate* government of neighboring Iraq to be inconsistent with the accepted norms of behavior among nations and the moral and religious basis which it claims.'⁶⁵

From Saddam Hussein's perspective, the calculated complacency of the Reagan administration and the continuous support of Iraq's chemical, biological and / or atomic weapons industries by companies from Belgium, Britain, China, France, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and the United States confirmed his impression that Iraq's unconventional warfare was tolerated.⁶⁶ '[T]he [Iranian] invaders should know,' a public statement proclaimed in 1984, 'that for every harmful insect there is an

⁶⁰ US Embassy in United Kingdom, Cable from Charles H. Price II to the DOS. 'Rumsfeld Mission: 20 December Meeting with Iraqi President Saddam Hussein', 21 December 1983. NSA, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁶¹ DOS, Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs Information Memorandum from Jonathan T. Howe to George P. Shultz. 'Iraq Use of Chemical Weapons', 1 November 1983. NSA, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

⁶² DOS, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs Action Memorandum from Jonathan T. Howe to Lawrence S. Eagleburger. 'Iraqi Use of Chemical Weapons' [Includes Cables Entitled 'Deterring Iraqi Use of Chemical Weapons' and 'Background of Iraqi Use of Chemical Weapons'], 21 November 1983. NSA, *op. cit.*, p. 6, emphasis added.

⁶³ On Rumsfeld's role in the negotiations, see also Joost R. Hilterman, 'The Men Who Helped the Man Who Gassed His Own People,' in Micah L. Sifry & Christopher Cerf (Eds) *The Iraq War Reader. History, Documents, Opinions* (London: Touchstone, 2003), pp. 41–44.

⁶⁴ DOS, Bureau of Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs Memorandum from James A. Placke to James M. Ealum [et al.]. ['US Condemnation of Iraqi Chemical Weapons Use'], 4 March 1984. NSA, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3, emphasis added.

⁶⁶ Alexander Zumach, 'Blühende Geschäfte. In sämtlichen Rüstungsbereichen haben Firmen aus den fünf ständigen Ratsländern Irak unterstützt', *die Tageszeitung (TAZ)* (19 December 2002), <<http://www.taz.de/pt/2002/12/19/a0076.nf/text>> [accessed 12 March 2006] and Adib-Moghaddam, 'The Whole Range of Saddam Hussein's War Crimes'.

insecticide capable of annihilating it whatever the number and Iraq possesses this annihilation insecticide'.⁶⁷ Asked whether Iraqi use of chemical weapons would affect relations between the White House and Saddam Hussein, a State Department spokesman replied at press briefing in March 1984: 'No. I am not aware of any change in our position. We're interested in being involved in a closer dialogue with Iraq.'⁶⁸

The support for Saddam Hussein also extended to diplomatic cover in the United Nations. When the Iranian government submitted a draft resolution asking for UN condemnation of the chemical warfare by Iraq, the US delegate was instructed to lobby for a general motion of 'no decision' on the resolution. At a meeting between Iraqi interests section head Nizar Hamdoon and then Deputy Assistant Secretary of State James Placke on 29 March 1984, the former spelled out what the Iraqi government expected from the UN resolution. Hamdoon stressed that his country favored a Security Council presidential statement to a resolution, reference to former resolutions on the war, progress toward termination of the conflict, and no mention of responsibility regarding the employment of chemical weapons. One day after the meeting, the Security Council issued the aforementioned presidential statement, condemning the use of chemical weapons without naming Iraq as the offending party. A State Department memorandum from 30 March 1984 acknowledged the successful diplomatic 'spin' in support of Iraq, noting that the 'statement... contains all three elements Hamdoon wanted.'⁶⁹

The actions during the latter half of the war, such as the US attacks on Iranian oil platforms during the 'tanker war' period and the shooting down by the USS Vincennes of an Iran Air passenger jet (an 'accident' in which 290 civilians were killed), only reconfirmed the Iraqi position.⁷⁰ The Iraqi regime even got away with an apology and the payment of US\$27.3 million for hitting the USS *Stark* with a missile, an incident that killed 37 US navy personnel and wounded twenty-one.⁷¹ The support for Saddam Hussein did not preclude, however, deals with the Iranian government. After all, it was not knowledge about Iraqi war crimes that proved disastrous for the Reagan administration but

⁶⁷ US Interests Section in Iraq, Cable from William L. Eagleton, Jr. to the DOS, 'Iraqi Warning re Iranian Offensive,' 22 February 1984. NSA, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

⁶⁸ DOS Cable from George P. Shultz to the United States Embassy in Lebanon [*et al.*]. 'Department Press Briefing, March 30, 1984', 31 March 1984. NSA, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

⁶⁹ DOS, Bureau of Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs Cover Memorandum from Allen Overmyer to James A. Placke. [United Nations Security Council Response to Iranian Chemical Weapons Complaint; Includes Revised Working Paper], 30 March 1984. NSA, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

⁷⁰ It was later established that the Iranian allegation that the US cruiser was in Iranian territorial waters was accurate. The captain of the USS *Vincennes* Will Rogers and even more surprisingly the Air Warfare Coordinator Scott Lustig subsequently would receive medals for their engagements in the Persian Gulf. The latter even achieved the Navy Commendation Medal with Combat V authorization for what was summarized as his 'heroic achievements'.

⁷¹ The USS *Stark* was hit by Exocet missiles that Iraq had acquired from France in a deal that was backed by the United States. In his speech to the US House of Representative, the late Texas Democrat Henry Gonzales touched on that point: 'I ask you how could we be supplying Iraq with everything from intelligence—because we had an intelligence-gathering agreement all during that war with Iraq—supplied them with everything else, even backed up foreign countries like France to make sure they supplied military things all the way from Mirages to Exocet missiles, one of which, incidentally, was the one that killed 37 of our sailors in the Persian Gulf', *op. cit.*

the much publicized Iran-Contra Affair.⁷² Important for our line of argument is that, by granting support to the Iraqi state, US policy presented Saddam Hussein as the guarantor of the regional status quo in the Persian Gulf, lending to him a prominent role in regional affairs. This in turn legitimated his self-perception as the bulwark against the revolutionary tide from Persia. '[Y]ou [were] not the ones who protected your friends during the war with Iran,' Saddam Hussein pointed out during a conversation with US Ambassador April Glaspie in the build-up to the second Persian Gulf War. 'I assure you, had the Iranians overrun the region, the American troops would not have stopped them, except by the use of nuclear weapons. I do not want to belittle you' the Iraqi President went on '[b]ut I hold this view by looking at the geography and nature of American society . . . Yours is a society which cannot accept 10,000 dead in one battle.'⁷³

That the United States had balance of power calculations in mind does not contradict our argument. What is central is that by supporting Saddam Hussein, the United States gave his regime the opportunity to act upon his plans to invade Iran. 'War roles' never are constituted merely in the encapsulated habitat of the nation-state. In order to enact effectively a certain role identity, social recognition is crucial. During the Iran-Iraq war, international society granted that support to Saddam Hussein. Without regional and global approval, the Ba'thist state never would have been able to act upon its role or follow the campaign of unrestrained warfare. At the end of the war (March 1988), this anarchic international context enabled Saddam Hussein to pursue the 'Anfal' campaign against Iraq's Kurdish population and Iranian army units operating in the area, culminating in the gassing of the eastern Iraqi town of Halabja and the killing of at least 4,000 to 5,000 people. The genocide of Halabja, the 'use of poison gas and other war crimes against Iran and the Iranian people' and the claim that 'Iraq summarily executed thousands of Iranian prisoners of war as a matter of policy' were not on top of the international agenda when they happened.⁷⁴ They only became relevant as a means to legitimate regime change in Iraq in the late 1990s and the invasion of the country in 2003.

⁷² The full details of the Iran-Contra affair remain undisclosed. What was revealed in congressional testimony is that the Reagan administration, with Israeli complicity, was engaged in a massive arms deal with the Islamic Republic, the profits of which were intended to finance the guerrilla war of the 'Contras' in Nicaragua. For the congressional hearings see Joel Brinkley (Ed.), *Report of the Congressional Committee: Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair* (New York: Times Book, 1988). For a discussion of the Iran-Contra-Affair and its impact on the Iran-Iraq war see Tarock, *The Superpowers' Involvement*, pp. 91–122.

⁷³ 'The Glaspie Transcript: Saddam meets the US Ambassador (25 July 1990)', in Micah L. Sifry and Christopher Cerf (Eds), *The Gulf War Reader*, p.125.

⁷⁴ See 'Saddam Hussein's Iraq'. Prepared by the US Department of State, September 1999. Available at <<http://www.fas.org/news/iraq/2000/02/iraq99.htm>>. In recent years, investigative journalists have provided further evidence for the support to Saddam. See David Leigh and John Hooper, 'Britain's dirty secret', *The Guardian* (6 March 2003), <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/Iraq/Story/0%2C2763%2C908426%2C00.html>> [accessed 13 March 2004]; Babak Dehghanpisheh, 'Grim Legacy', *Newsweek* (19 March 2003) <<http://msnbc.msn.com/id/3068535/>> [accessed 6 March 2006]; Christopher Dickey and Evan Thomas, 'How Saddam Happened', *Newsweek* (23 September 2002) <<http://foi.missouri.edu/terrorbkgd/how Saddam.html>> [accessed 13 January 2006]; Michael Dobbs, 'US Had Key Role in Iraq Buildup, Trade in Chemical Arms Allowed Despite Their Use on Iranians, Kurds', *The Washington Post* (30 December 2002). <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A52241-2002Dec29?language=printer>> [accessed 13 March 2004]; and William Blum, 'Anthrax for Export. US Companies sold Iraq the ingredients for a witch's brew', *The Progressive* (April 1998) <<http://www.progressive.org/0901/anth0498.html>> [accessed 13 June 2001].

Patents of an Invented War

In the middle of the Second World War, Margaret Mead boldly asserted that war is neither a biological necessity nor a sociological inevitability, but an invented social institution that will be rendered obsolete once a better invention takes its place.⁷⁵ Contemporary theorists of war agree:

[W]ar does not appear to be one of life's necessities—it is not an unpleasant fact of existence that is somehow required by human nature or by the grand scheme of things. . . . War may be a social affliction, but in important respects it is also a social affliction that can be shrugged off.⁷⁶

What I attempted to do in this article, much in above spirit, is to discuss some of the inventions surrounding the Iran-Iraq war in order to show that the conflict was not inevitable, and that there was a cultural transmission belt that led to the conflict and sustained it. To that end, I have pursued a dual path: On the one hand, I outlined the ideational manufacturing of the Ba'thist garrison state and its anti-Iranian precepts. On the other hand, I investigated the accommodation of this identity by regional states and the wider international community. This 'cultural genealogy' of the conflict made explicit the connection between the political culture of Ba'thist Iraq, the social engineering of international legitimacy, and the invasion of Iran. I am not saying that power politics or other 'realist' categories did not play a role in the war. Nor am I saying that 'culture' is an explanatory concept that can account for most of what is happening in international society. Nor certainly do I believe that one should challenge historical teleology in order to present competing, all-encompassing 'truths,' as if this narrative can be detached from my own academic socialization, personal history, and intellectual interests. What I am saying is that without the invention of Ba'thist Arab nationalism and its anti-Iranian precepts; without its institutionalization and reification as Iraq's preferred state identity; without its internalization by the Ba'thist elites; and without the implicit approval of this invented garrison state identity by the international community before (and during) the conflict, the Iran-Iraq war would not have 'happened.' There was no historically ciphered enmity between Iraqis and Iranians, no automatism that triggered the invasion. Rather to the contrary, both peoples have shared long periods of common history within different Muslim empires and "pre-Islamic empires", both are intermingled ethnically, religiously and culturally. The war, in short, was not inevitable; it was in many ways imported from the invented political culture of Iraqi-Ba'thism, and perpetuated within the anarchic spaces of international society; the war 'happened' and was made to function in that international cultural episteme.

Such an understanding of the Iran-Iraq war opens up wider questions for our understanding of inter-state conflicts in west Asia and elsewhere. Quite obviously my argument does not support a particular 'science' of international relations, realist, liberal, constructivist, post-modern, or otherwise. Yet, I found it useful to look at the cultural

⁷⁵ Margaret Mead, 'Warfare is only an invention—Not a Biological Necessity', in Leon Bramson and George W. Goethals (Eds) *War: Studies from Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology* (London: Basic Books, 1964), pp. 269–274.

⁷⁶ John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (London: Basic Books, 1990), p. 13.

inventions permeating particular societies at particular points in time to grasp better the dynamics of a particular conflict. On the basis of what historical narratives are ideas and ideologies propagated and reified? How do societies constitute themselves in opposition or in relation to others? And how, then, does this socially engineered self-perception affect the grand strategic preferences of the state? It would be salutary for future research on conflict in west Asia to focus on the political-cultural processes that permeate the dialectic between states and societies in the region, be they Muslim, secular, Jewish, or otherwise. There is no 'Da Vinci code,' and no 'holy blood' or 'holy grails' that condemn west Asia to recurrent periods of conflict. A critical approach toward the international relations of the region, I submit, may give impetus, as far and as wide as possible, to the undefined work of regional peace.

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