

**Phythian, Mark. Arming Iraq: How the U.S. and Britain Secretly Built Saddam's War Machine. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1997.**

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After Iraq's expulsion from Kuwait during the Second Gulf War, questions were raised as to who was responsible for helping Saddam Hussein build up the vast military machine that called forth the combined might of the international community to bring about its defeat. Mark Phythian, a lecturer in Politics at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Wolverhampton, England, seeks to answer this question in his book *Arming Iraq*. At first glance, his contention that the US and Britain are to blame appears misplaced. He cites SIPRI estimates of Iraqi imports of major weapon systems showing that Baghdad imported some \$25 billion worth of weapons from 1980 to 1989. The American share of this cumulative total was approximately one per cent while that of the British was a paltry .07 percent. Imports from the USSR, on the other hand, accounted for nearly 54 percent of the total. Surely, it would have been more accurate to sub-title the book "How the USSR built Saddam's war machine."

Nevertheless, as Phythian demonstrates, open and direct arms sales were only the tip of the iceberg in a vast effort to funnel weapons to Iraq. Manufacturers used various deceptions to mask officially prohibited exports to that country including false end-user certificates and misleading shipment descriptions among others. In addition, friendly countries such as Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia were used as "conduits" or intermediate stops on the road that ultimately led to Iraq.

The deceit and subterfuge surrounding arms exports to Iraq (and, to a lesser extent, Iran) make for a story that is, at times, complex. This, however, is not the fault of the narrative. It is simply the nature of the labyrinthine world of the international arms trade. The chapter concerning British munitions manufacturer *Astra Holdings plc*, for example, describes a complicated web of personalities and institutions involved in the Iraq arms trade, including government departments, intelligence agencies and the military, holding companies and their domestic and foreign subsidiaries, cartels, and merchant banks. In this convoluted tale, "you can't tell the players without a program," which Phythian helpfully provides in a selected list of acronyms and "dramatis personae" found at the beginning of the book.

Phythian explains in great detail how the secret arms trade with Iraq was carried on. He is equally dutiful in addressing the why. Both the US and Britain officially adopted a neutral stance during the Iran-Iraq War as well as a policy prohibiting arms sales that would prolong the conflict. Yet, in practice, they supplied weapons to both sides, tilting in favor of Iraq after the Iranians turned the tide of the war in 1982. According to Phythian, there were several reasons for this pro-Iraqi bias. In geopolitical terms, London and Washington wanted to maintain the pro-Western status quo in the Persian Gulf. They did not want either Iran or Iraq to dominate the Gulf and its vital oil resources. Thus, when it appeared that Iran was gaining the upper hand, they began to increase their material, intelligence, and diplomatic support for Iraq. In economic terms, Iraq was a lucrative market upon which many firms and jobs depended. Thus, despite Baghdad's increasingly objectionable behavior, such as gassing its Kurds in 1988, the two

governments were loathe to criticize Baghdad and risk losing access to this important market. Finally, as argued in Britain, the conventional arms relationship with Iraq provided intelligence agencies with a window on its more worrisome non-conventional weapons programs, though, paradoxically, the British government did not act on intelligence gained through these channels for fear of exposing its sources. Thus, the rationales for the illicit arms trade with Iraq were many. It remains an open question whether these reasons were sufficient to justify, in Britain at least, a duplicitous policy that had as a corollary deliberately misleading the House of Commons and denying private businessmen implicated in the government-condoned arms trade critical documents needed for their legal defence.

*Arming Iraq* is an excellent case-study of the international arms trade, exposing some of the more unsavory elements in this deadly traffic. However, it also highlights a broader foreign policy phenomenon: the penchant of states to create "monsters" that serve their short-term interests only to come back to haunt their "creators" in the longer run. In the case of Iraq, the West deluded itself into believing that Baghdad had moderated its militaristic ambitions in the Persian Gulf and, after the Iran-Iraq war, could serve as a guardian of the regional order against the Iranian fundamentalist threat. Its invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 exploded this fantasy.

Iraq is only the most glaring example of this unfortunate state practice. Others could be added to the list. Throughout the 1980s, for example, US intelligence employed Panamanian strong-man General Manuel Noriega as an informant on Cuba and as a supporter of the Nicaraguan Contra rebels. In his "spare time," however, he also worked with Latin American drug cartels smuggling illegal drugs into the US. No longer able to tolerate his criminal and dictatorial activities, American troops invaded Panama in December 1989 to apprehend the former intelligence prot  g   and return him to face justice in the US. In another example, in the late 1980s, the Israeli government encouraged the emergence of Hamas as an organized Islamist challenger to the PLO. The intent was to undermine the influence among Palestinians of what was then considered to be the most dangerous political-terrorist organization. With the signing of the Oslo accords, however, the PLO became, for better or for worse, Israel's partner for peace while Hamas developed into the new and more deadly terrorist foe. And, finally, following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, the US and various Arab governments funded and trained religiously-inspired Arabs who traveled to that war-torn country to join their Afghan brethren in fighting against their atheistic opponents. After the Soviet withdrawal ten years later, many of these radicalized "Afghan Arabs" returned to their homes in Algeria, Egypt, and elsewhere where they subsequently launched bloody campaigns of domestic terror and insurrection aimed at overthrowing the regimes that had only a few years before had extolled their virtues as fighters for Islam.

Too often, decision makers mistakenly assume that an overlap of short-term interest represents a convergence of long-term values. As in the case of arming Iraq, this is a policy that can have disastrous consequences.

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