



---

# The Chemical Threat in Iraq's Motives for the Kuwait Invasion

by Jean Pascal Zanders

*POLE-PAPERS Vol. 2, n°1 - 1995*

*Centrum voor Polemologie  
Vrije Universiteit Brussel*

De serie ***POLE-PAPERS*** van het Centrum voor Polemologie van de Vrije Universiteit Brussel is in eerste instantie opgezet als een kanaal voor de publikatie van voorlopige onderzoeksresultaten. De voornaamste bedoeling is op die manier de nodige kritische reacties los te weken vanwege collega's in de onderzoeksgemeenschap van de Internationale Betrekkingen en het Vredesonderzoek. Als dusdanig betreft het materiaal dat later elders zal worden gepubliceerd als hoofdstukken in boeken of in de vorm van tijdschriftartikelen. De uitgebrachte meningen zijn volledig voor rekening van de auteurs en vertegenwoordigen niet noodzakelijk de visie van het Centrum.

\*

The ***POLE-PAPERS*** series published by the Centre for Polemology of the Free University of Brussels offers an outlet for the publication of research in progress. The primary aim is to attract constructive criticism from colleagues in the International Relations and Peace Research scientific community. As such it concerns preliminary work to be published as chapters in a book or as journal articles. The opinions presented are those of the authors, and do not necessarily depict the viewpoint of the Centre.

**ISSN: 1370-4508**

**© 1995**

**Centrum voor Polemologie  
Vrije Universiteit Brussel  
Pleinlaan 2  
B-1050 Brussel  
België**

*Tel. 32 (02) 6292228*

*Fax. 32 (02) 6292282*

When the first Gulf War ended in August 1988, it was hard to discard the feeling that a new military conflict in the region was only a matter of years, half a decade at the most. Indications were abundant. When Iran finally accepted Security Council Resolution 598 calling for a cease-fire on 18 July 1988, it was Baghdad that sought to prolong the war by insisting on prior bilateral talks with Teheran. Meanwhile it launched its massive offensive against the Kurds in northern Iraq, using chemical weapons indiscriminately. The attacks continued well beyond the cease-fire date of 8 August and its formal signing on 20 August. The United Nations and outside powers in the region chose to ignore the Iraqi onslaught for fear of rekindling the war. As British Ambassador to the United Nations said at the time, the Security Council "*didn't want to upset the applecart*".<sup>1</sup> The U.N. even delayed publication of a report detailing Iraqi use of chemical weapons until the negotiations with Iran were well under way. The attacks after Teheran's acceptance of Resolution 598 and the lack of an Iranian military response must have reinforced Baghdad's belief that it had won the war. The lack of international reproach must have convinced it that its chemical attacks were legitimate. Only, one was pretty certain that Iraq was to be a major player in the next Middle East War and Israel the adversary.

### **Economic motives for the Kuwait invasion**

The first Gulf War placed such a heavy burden on Iraq's economy, that recovery would inevitably be a long and slow process. Indeed, as one economist put it in 1989, "*Iraq has been turned into a 'military machine', with major consequences for the post-war period, as the readjustment to a more 'normal' life may prove too difficult*".<sup>2</sup> By the end of the seventies, Iraq had reached

---

<sup>1</sup> J. Bulloch; H. Morris, *The Gulf War. Its Origins, History and Consequences*. Methuen, London, 1989, p. 259.

<sup>2</sup> K. Mofid, *The Economic Consequences of the Gulf War*. Routledge, London, 1990. p. 89.

the peak of a sustained economic growth. Between 1978 and 1979 oil production rose 30% from 2.7 million barrels to 3.5 million barrels a day. Oil revenues increased a dramatic 97.2%. They surged from \$10.8 billion in 1978 to \$21.3 billion in 1979 and the first nine months of 1980 already accounted for \$22.4 billion in revenues.<sup>3</sup> When Iraq launched its offensive against Iran in September 1980, it possessed \$35 billion in foreign exchange reserves. However, within the first days of the war, most of Iraq's oil producing and processing facilities were destroyed or damaged, leading to an average drop in productivity of 9.7% a year and an annual 12.7% loss of export revenues between 1979 and 1986. The economic damage, including military expenditure, GDP losses and uninvested capital, ran at an estimated \$ 226 billion for 1986 alone.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Iraq suffered other economic setbacks during the first years of the war. The 1981-85 Five-Year National Development Plan that aimed at reducing Iraq's dependency on oil revenues as main supplier of foreign exchange and at increasing non-energy exports, failed completely. Instead of rising, the real value of non-energy exports remained at more or less the same level, however, given inflation, it declined too.<sup>5</sup>

The focus on the depletion of Iraq's oil revenues as a consequence of the war hides the fundamental structural weakness of Iraq's economy: most of the productive output goes to meet final demand uses (export or domestic consumption) and is not sold to other industrial sectors. This absence of so-called 'feeder' industries and internal linkages has prevented the emergence of new or complementary industries, which would have contributed to an overall higher level of economic development. In the decade preceding Iraq's oil boom, productivity only increased marginally in sectors other than mining. In some areas such as crude oil and natural gas, electricity, water and gas, construction, and manufacturing, the input requirements for a particular output increased, thus leading to declining productivity. The for the Iraqi economy important sector of agriculture, forestry and fishery grew just under one per cent between 1960 and 1974.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Iraq is one of those Gulf Arab states that failed to extend their growth successes in improvements in human capital, another important factor for sustained economic development. Being a major arms-import-

---

<sup>3</sup> K. Mofid, *op. cit.*, 1990, p.37.

<sup>4</sup> G. Bechter, *Conflict in the Persian Gulf*. In: *Disarmament & Security 1988-1989 Yearbook*. Novosti Press Agency, Moscow, 1989. p. 511.

<sup>5</sup> K. Mofid, *op. cit.* 1990, p.38.

<sup>6</sup> A. Al-Roubaie, *Structural Change and Iraq's Structure of Production*. Arab Studies Quarterly, Vol. 12, n°3 & 4, Summer/Fall 1990. Especially at pp. 91 and 94.

ing country and investing massively in domestic advanced weapons research, Iraq - in a pattern typical for non-arms producing countries - drew scarce resources away from growth enhancing investments in education, health, infrastructure, and so forth to fund expansions in the military budget. Here too, Baghdad thus failed to generate cross-productivity effects that would have supported long-term development.<sup>7</sup>

Baghdad achieved its remarkable economic growth at the end of the seventies as a result of a sharp rise of the export revenues of a single commodity, petroleum. The extra income was not generated by increased productivity, but by more favourable prices on the world market, a factor which was largely beyond the government's control. As in other oil-producing Arab countries, the government is the sole recipient of oil revenues. Since this income does not go toward the payment of the production factors, the government is responsible for channelling it into the economy through public expenditures. Given their large share of GDP, the central authorities exert a major influence on the direction of economic development by determining the investment factors. Perhaps not surprisingly, Iraq's economic sectors with the highest allocations - chemicals, rubber, oil refinery, machinery and equipment, other manufacturing, and services - were the ones with the highest output.<sup>8</sup> In the area of defence in particular, this high degree of central organisation suited Iraqi wartime needs perfectly and was an important contributing factor to the for a developing country very advanced nature of the armament programmes.<sup>9</sup> The system, however, again precluded the forging of strong linkages with other non-military industrial sectors and the whole enterprise depended on high crude oil prices on the world market. As one author noted, "*changes in the volume of these earnings may have drastic effects on the productivity of the main sectors of the economy.*" Consequently, this "*high dependence of the government on oil revenues as a main source of public expenditure may constitute a threat to the social and economic stability*

---

<sup>7</sup> R. E. Looney, *Military Expenditures, Military Participation Rates, and Human Capital Development in the Arab World*. Current Research on Peace and Violence, n°1, 1990. pp. 39, 41, 44. Y. Sayigh, *Iraq's Ambitions: Arms Producer and Regional Power*. Middle East International, n°367, 19 January 1990. pp. 17-18.

<sup>8</sup> A. Al-Roubaie, *op. cit.*, Summer/Fall 1990. p. 91.

<sup>9</sup> Y. Sayigh, *op. cit.*, 19 January 1990, p. 18. From the end of the seventies onwards, the arms industry, including the ordnance factories, was the responsibility of the Military Industrialisation Authority, while the General Organisation for Technical Industries coordinated advanced programmes such as chemical weaponry and missiles. In 1987 both were subsumed in the new Ministry of Industry and Military Industry, again reflecting the ongoing centralisation.

of the economy".<sup>10</sup> In 1988, Iraq emerged from the war with part of its industrial base destroyed, many of its resources directed towards the war effort, and a sharply reduced income as a consequence of fallen oil prices. Moreover, the glut on the world market meant that the Iraqi leadership had even fewer opportunities than before to influence world prices. Its only opening was a renegotiation of production quotas within OPEC. However, the other Gulf Arab states, to which Iraq owed several tens of billion dollars as war debts, geared petroleum production to their respective economic needs, further compounding Baghdad's problems.

**Table 1: Iraq - Military Expenditure 1975-1990**

|      | <b>in million US\$<br/>(1988 constant prices)</b> | <b>as % of Gross<br/>Domestic Product</b> |
|------|---|---|
| 1975 | 9,675   | 11.7                                      |
| 1976 | 9,489   | 10.7                                      |
| 1977 | 9,916   | 9.8                                       |
| 1978 | 9,382   | 8.1                                       |
| 1979 | 11,872  | (6.9)                                     |
| 1980 | 12,306  | 6.3                                       |
| 1981 | 14,007  | 12.3                                      |
| 1982 | 21,952  | 18.4                                      |
| 1983 | 28,596  | 24.3                                      |
| 1984 | 31,590  | 29.1                                      |
| 1985 | 23,506  | 26.0                                      |
| 1986 | 16,531  | 24.2                                      |
| 1987 | 17,073  | 24.3                                      |
| 1988 | 12,868  | 23.0                                      |
| 1989 | 10,720  | 20.0                                      |
| 1990 | 9,268   | 20.0                                      |

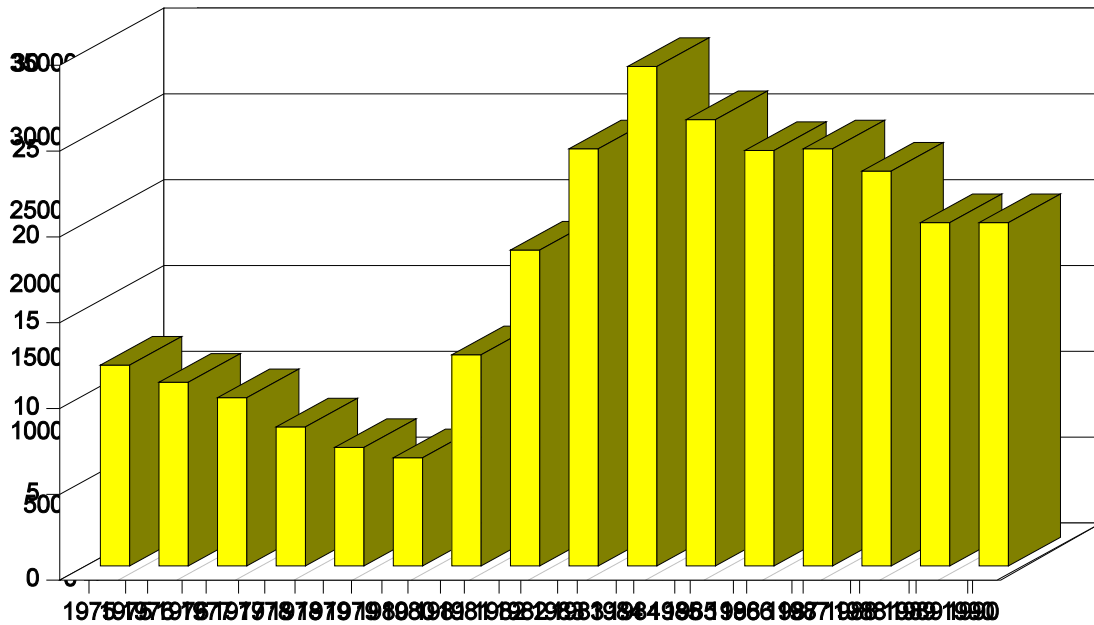
**Source:** SIPRI Yearbooks 1985-1992 (World Military Expenditure)

The data for 1980-1990 were given by SIPRI in constant 1988 prices. The data for 1975-1977 were given in constant 1980 prices and have been converted in 1988 constant prices by multiplying them by factor 4.3056. The data for 1978-1979 were given in constant 1986 prices and have been converted in 1988 constant prices by multiplying them by factor 1.4276.  
( ): Uncertain data.

<sup>10</sup> A. Al-Roubaie, *op. cit.*, Summer/Fall 1990. p. 96.

## Military Expenditure 1975-1990

In million US\$ (1980 constant prices)



The structural weaknesses of the Iraqi economic system had already surfaced during the early stages of the first Gulf war. In 1980, President Saddam Hussein announced that Iraq would strive for agricultural self-sufficiency. The goal was not exaggerated. Iraq has between Tigris and Euphrates some of the richest land in the world. However, during the war years, dependency on the outside world increased manifold. The deterioration in productivity followed mainly from the rising cost of the war; not a surprising development, since public funds, on which productivity depended, were increasingly diverted to the war effort. Moreover, during the first five war years, the economically active population in agriculture declined from 30% to 24%. This rural-urban migration meant that fewer people had to produce for more, which proved beyond their capabilities. Dependency on the outside world was even more pronounced in other non-oil industrial sectors, where development relied to a large extent on imports. On the whole, the non-military import dependency averaged 2.9% of the Gross Domestic Product between 1973 and 1978, and rose to 32.5% between 1979 and 1985.<sup>11</sup> Iraq's real weakness lay in the sharp fall of foreign ex

<sup>11</sup> K. Mofid, *op. cit.*, 1990, p.50.

change income and the resulting rising inability to sustain the high levels of import. In 1983 oil prices plummeted \$29 a barrel, adding to Iraq's overall income problems. That year the country had reached its maximum production capacity, so the loss in revenue could not be compensated by higher output.

These figures do not yet take military expenditures into account. During the second half of the seventies Iraq's military expenditures stayed more or less level at \$10 billion (1988 constant prices). They rocketed during the first half of the war, having tripled by 1984. Thereafter, against expectations, they dropped abruptly. By 1986, military expenditures were virtually halved and in 1990 they were back at the same level of the late seventies. (Table 1; Chart 1) However, these amounts gain real significance if set out as percentage of Iraq's Gross Domestic Product (Table 1; Chart 2). From 1975, year of signing the Algiers Accords with Iran, thus effectively ending the Kurdish uprising, until the beginning of the first Gulf war in 1980, military expenditure as percentage of GDP declined steadily. Since military expenditures in constant terms remained steady and started rising from 1979 onwards, this drop reflected the massive impact of Iraq's oil boom on the GDP rather than demilitarization. The damage to Iraq's oil industry during the first days of the war and the resulting loss of revenue caused a doubling of the defence burden in 1981, although in constant prices the war effort increased by 3.56%. In 1983 Iraq's oil production reached maximum capacity, allowing a doubling of military expenditures in constant terms by 1984. Still the lower world market prices resulted in a record defence burden for any of the war years (29.1%). From then onwards, the toll on the Iraqi society was heavy. Although defence expenditure dropped steeply, it remained above 20% of the GDP, indicating the country's economic collapse.

The first Gulf war cost Iraq an estimated \$452.6 billion.<sup>12</sup> This, however, was only the monetary cost, and excluded *"inflationary costs, the loss of services and earnings by the many hundreds of thousands of people killed, the depletion of natural resources, the postponement of crucial development projects, the cost of delayed training and education of the young people [...].* The sum also excluded *"the cost of welfare payments to the hundreds of thousands injured in the war who are not able to contribute fully to the creation of wealth for the national economy"*.<sup>13</sup> The war absorbed approximately 112% of Iraq's Gross National Product, leaving it with

---

<sup>12</sup> K. Mofid, *op. cit.*, 1990, p.132.

<sup>13</sup> K. Mofid, *op. cit.*, 1990, p.139.



| Table 2: Iraq - Military Buildup |       |       |        |         |
|----------------------------------|-------|-------|--------|---------|
| Weapon system                    | 1980  | 1988  | 1989   | 1990    |
| Main Battle Tanks                | 2,750 | 4,500 | 5,500  | 5,500   |
| Armoured Fighting Vehicles       | 2,500 | 4,000 | 8,100+ | 10,000+ |
| Combat Aircraft                  | 332   | 500   | 513    | 689     |
| Helicopters                      | 277   | [150] | 160    | 489     |

**Source:** IISS, *The Military Balance 1980-1981, 1988-1989, 1989-1990, 1990-1991*.

[ ]: Army only; no information on Air Force; no information on war losses.

a ± \$80 billion debt in 1988, of which one quarter was to non-Arab states. In the two years following the war, the Iraqi leadership, however, mismanaged its foreign debt and on the eve of the invasion of Kuwait, it owed an additional \$10 billion to its non-Arab creditors (Europe, Japan, and the United States). During the first half of 1990 prices for crude oil dropped from \$20 to \$14 a barrel, causing Iraq severe fiscal problems, which the other Gulf Arab states were unwilling to finance.<sup>14</sup>

Between September 1980 and August 1988 Iraq managed to expand its armed forces and inventory of major weapons systems considerably despite the losses incurred. On the eve of the war, the Iraqi Armed Forces consisted of around 242,000 personnel.<sup>15</sup> By 1988 the total had increased to 1 million people under arms<sup>16</sup>, and, despite some attempts to demobilize, it remained unchanged during the two subsequent years.<sup>17</sup> Table 2 illustrates the Iraqi military buildup for some key weapons systems. Significantly, all four categories expanded markedly between the first and second Gulf war. In addition, Iraq managed to maintain or expand its defence industrial base and continued the development and production of extended-range versions of the Soviet Scud-B missile and its nuclear, chemical and biological arsenal.

<sup>14</sup> P. Marr, *Iraq's Uncertain Future*. Current History, Vol. 90, n°552, January 1991. p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> Britannica Book of the Year 1981, table p.282; A. H. Cordesman, *The Gulf and the Search for Strategic Stability*. Westview Press, Boulder, 1984. p. 654, Table 16.1; IISS, *The Military Balance 1980-1981*.

<sup>16</sup> IISS, *The Military Balance 1988-1989*, p.101.

<sup>17</sup> IISS, *The Military Balance 1989-1990*, p.101, and 1990-1991, p.105.

The basic question, as Kamran Mofid put it, is how could "a country which has lost much of its oil revenues and all of its foreign reserves and has gone through a seven year war end up with so much more military hardware than at the beginning of the war?"<sup>18</sup> Early on in the war, other Arab countries, most notably Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, financed Iraq's war efforts to the tune of \$1 billion a month. At that rate, they risked depleting their own financial reserves. Therefore, from 1982 onwards, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait began exporting approximately 300,000 barrels a day on behalf of Iraq.<sup>19</sup> Under an agreement, Iraq was required to repay that oil and other loans in kind at some point in the future.<sup>20</sup>

Other ways enabling Iraq to continue the war effort included attractive terms for loans from Western countries, easy rescheduling of payment procedures and extensive agricultural assistance. The US agricultural-credit programme, valued at \$500 million in 1986, allowed Iraq to import a wide range of American produce. No other country had received such assistance. Defaulting on these payments would have left the American taxpayer to foot the bill, while Baghdad was able to divert more funds to purchasing weaponry. However, most Western loans were short-term, which, with plummeting oil prices, caused a snowball effect wreaking havoc on Iraqi finances.

To summarize, in monetary terms, the war cost Iraq \$452.6 billion and left it with a growing debt of between \$80 and \$100 billion. Additionally, Iraq suffered an estimated \$67 billion damages to infrastructure.<sup>21</sup> The opportunity cost, however, caused the Iraqi society the greatest suffering: money from other industrial sectors and services had been reallocated to the war effort. The structure of the Iraqi economy - few cross-linkages and investment based on governmental allocation of resources obtained from the export of crude oil - meant that other sectors of society had to undergo the consequences sooner than later. Indeed, in 1989 Iraq's economy showed a negative growth of 15%.

Already the day after the end of the first Gulf war Kuwait increased its production of crude oil resulting in a steep drop in world market prices to \$15 per barrel. Each dollar per barrel less cost Iraq \$1 billion a year. The \$7 billion a year Baghdad risked to lose as a consequence of Kuwait's

---

<sup>18</sup> K. Mofid, *op. cit.*, 1990, p.89.

<sup>19</sup> Saudi Arabia also paid directly for the Soviet weapons Iraq imported.

<sup>20</sup> T. Stauffer: *Economic Warfare in the Gulf*, *American-Arab Affairs*, n° 14, 1985; as quoted by K. Mofid, *op. cit.*, 1990, p.134. J. T. Haldane, *Oil: The Base of Iraq's Economic Future*. *Middle East International*, n°369, 16 February 1990. p. 18.

<sup>21</sup> J. Roberts, *Oil, the Military and the Gulf War of 1991*. *The RUSI Journal*, Vol. 136, n°1, Spring 1991. p. 13.

policy equalled the annual amount it needed just to service its foreign debts.<sup>22</sup> After a new OPEC agreement on production quotas early in 1989 the price per barrel stabilised around \$18. However, a year later, overproduction by mainly Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates caused the price to plummet to \$14.<sup>23</sup>

OPEC's inability to check its members and thus to guarantee high and stable oil prices on the world market left President Saddam Hussein with a triple problem. 1. How does he relaunch the economy and development of his country? 2. How does he meet the social needs of the Iraqi population, and in particular of those who have suffered badly in the war? 3. How does he sustain the huge armed forces, equipped with sophisticated weaponry? His greatest difficulty of all was how to address these three questions simultaneously with a bankrupt economy.

### **Political motives for the Kuwait invasion**

The invasion of the emirate on 2 August 1990 followed a failed policy of coercion from which the Ba'ath leadership, in view of its other but intertwined political agendas, could not back down. The policy of coercion had two major thrusts. On the one hand, Iraq used formal diplomatic channels, such as OPEC, the Arab Cooperation Council, the Arab League and bilateral negotiations, to assert its leadership in the Arab world and thus to press for adjustments in oil production quotas. On the other, it struck populist pan-Arab themes so that the masses would pressure their governments to support Iraq's causes.

The drive for Arab leadership began soon after Saddam Hussein's usurpation of the presidency and his push to ostracise Egypt for signing the Camp David Accords. Two years into the war with Iran, Iraq expanded the legitimation for the conflict by projecting itself as the defender of the Arab world from the Islamic revolution. Initially, Kuwaiti and Saudi financial injections in the had aided the Ba'ath leadership to organise daily life as normally as possible while increasing military spend-

---

<sup>22</sup> Iraq made the claim in a memorandum submitted to the Arab League on 16 July 1990. Document as reproduced in: P. Salinger; E. Laurent, *Guerre du Golfe. Le Dossier Secret*. Olivier Orban, Paris, 1991, at p. 282.

<sup>23</sup> Kuwait, which received most of its income from investments abroad and was thus less dependent on world oil prices, advocated a policy of gaining a larger market share for OPEC through lower prices. However, for smaller producers or countries unable to increase production, such as Iraq, such a strategy verged on economic collapse. (N. Jaber, *What Could Come Out from Jeddah*. Middle East International, n°381, 3 August 1990. p. 5.)

ing. However, in 1982, after the two Gulf states had suspended their financial aid and started to sell oil on behalf of Iraq, Baghdad was incurring a sizeable opportunity cost as it had to divert more and more funds from social and economic projects to the war effort. Iran lent credence to the shifting legitimation by refusing the 1982 Iraqi peace offer and declaring the overthrow of President Saddam Hussein's regime as its primary war aim. Sudden harsh Western criticism over Iraq's persecution of the Kurds in the autumn of 1988 similarly led Arab states to rally to Baghdad's side.

Iraq's imagery of bulwark against Iran's religious expansionism - only too happily endorsed by the conservative monarchies during the war - was the foundation of its claim to Arab leadership and created an erroneous expectation that the Arab brethren would cancel the war debts. Any act to the contrary the Ba'ath leadership viewed as an insult. There were to be many after the 1988 cease-fire.

At a summit meeting in the Jordanian capital on 24 February 1990, which was supposed to celebrate the Arab Cooperation Council's first anniversary, president Saddam Hussein, in an acrimonious discourse, claimed Arab leadership.<sup>24</sup> He noted the dwindling Soviet influence in world politics and concluded that the United States would be able to dictate oil prices to suit its own interests and Middle East policy, especially regarding a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He was particularly terse toward Egypt, an American client state, apparently causing the Egyptian president to leave Jordan prematurely. However, fearing such an Iraqi move, Hosni Mubarak with the tacit support of the Gulf monarchies, had weeks earlier accepted an overture by Syria, which had supported Iran in the 1st Gulf war, to balance Iraq's military might.<sup>25</sup> Saddam Hussein also turned on the oil-producing Gulf monarchies, whom he considered in the American sphere of influence, for their pricing policy. A week later, in a telephone conversation with King Hussein, he reportedly laid out the three issues that required immediate resolution:<sup>26</sup>

- the border dispute with Kuwait, especially as regards the large Rumaila fields, from which Kuwait was illegally extracting oil. On the eve of the invasion of Kuwait, Iraq was to demand a payment of \$2.4 bn in compensation.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> P. Salinger; E. Laurent, *op. cit.*, 1991, pp. 13-16. L. Andoni, *The ACC Summit: Saddam's Bid for Leadership*. Middle East International, n°370, 2 March 1990. p. 12.

<sup>25</sup> J. Muir, *Why Asad Turned to Cairo*. Middle East International, n°366, 5 January 1990. p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> P. Salinger; E. Laurent, *op. cit.*, 1991. p. 20.

<sup>27</sup> N. Jaber, *op. cit.*, 3 August 1990. p. 5.

- the leasing of the Kuwaiti islands of Warba and Bubyah, which were vital to secure Iraq's unhindered access to the Gulf; and
- the remission of the war debts.

The following weeks Iraq provoked one crisis after the other with the West and Israel. On 15 March the British journalist Bazoft was executed on spying charges. A British nurse who was captured with him near a missile plant was imprisoned. Instead of listening to Western pleas for clemency Saddam Hussein rallied and obtained support from Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf emirates and many Arab organisations including the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Arab League. Although formally the support was given on legal grounds of non-interference in Iraq's internal affairs, many a question was raised on why Baghdad was bent on creating a prolonged international issue. The object was double. On the one hand, the Ba'ath leadership projected the terror which ensured its domestic power onto the international arena in its bid for regional dominance. On the other, the incident allowed it to present itself as being victimised by the West, thus ensuring popular support throughout the Arab world.<sup>28</sup> This double track Saddam Hussein continued in a speech on 1 April, which was widely interpreted as a direct threat to Israel (see *infra*). The main thrusts were a claim to Iraq's technological and military superiority, which offered a credible deterrent to Israel's aggression, and a decrying of Arab humility. Meanwhile he also championed the Palestinian cause, a move warmly welcomed by the PLO. Iraq's coercive diplomacy met its greatest success at the Baghdad emergency summit held on 28-30 May where, it seemed, the Gulf monarchies were forced to toe the Iraqi line. Among other things, it compelled the Gulf Arab states to view the immigration of Soviet Jews into Israel as a security threat and to face up to the political, economic or military consequences. The Palestinian issue featured high on the agenda and resolutions were adopted which might compel sanctions against any country hostile to Palestinian rights. The summit resolutions referred to a joint Arab defence pact, which envisaged obligations for Egypt too despite its Camp David agreements with Israel. Iraq also managed to discredit the United States as an honest mediator in the Middle East.<sup>29</sup> Baghdad thus succeeded in projecting itself as leader of the Arab nation by emphasising the Arab-Israeli conflict and in being accepted as Israel's counterweight in the regional balance of power.

---

<sup>28</sup> N. Jaber, *War of Words after Bazoft's Execution*. Middle East International, n°372, 30 March 1990. p. 9.

<sup>29</sup> L. Andoni, *Success for Hussein and Arafat*. Middle East International, n°377, 8 June 1990. pp. 4-5.

President Hussein's victory was notwithstanding not an absolute success. He had mobilised Arab countries against the West regarding Iraq's internal affairs and in support of the Palestinian cause, but obtained no succour for his economic plight. He failed in convincing the other leaders that his war debts were pan-Arab debts. In an unscheduled closed meeting during the Baghdad Conference, in which the leaders were forbidden to bring in even their advisors, Saddam Hussein bitterly attacked Saudi Arabia and Kuwait for their oil policies and, meaningfully, never mentioned Israel nor the United States. He reportedly made it absolutely clear that he considered the situation an aggression with as sole purpose the enslavement of the Iraqi people.<sup>30</sup> Some six weeks later, on 16 July, the Arab League met in Tunis. Tariq Aziz, Iraq's foreign minister, handed a memorandum to the organisation's secretary-general, which amounted to nothing less than a declaration of war against Kuwait. Depicting the emirate's oil policy as a major crime against the supreme interests of the entire Arab nation and, in particular, as an intentional strategy to weaken Iraq, the document also accused Kuwait of having established an infrastructure inside the Iraqi border to extract oil from Rumaila. Kuwait had ignored any call since the beginning of the year to find a negotiated solution. The memorandum concluded by calling for aid comparable to the US Marshall-plan to rebuild the Iraqi nation.<sup>31</sup> Thereafter, the rhetoric escalated and a final attempt to diffuse the crisis at a meeting in Saudi Arabia on the eve of the invasion ended acrimoniously. For seven months the domestic economy, oil prices and the border dispute over Rumaila had dominated Iraq's political agenda with all stratagems geared to a single goal.

The second thrust consisted of the Ba'athist leadership's public posturing and direct appeal to the Arab masses over the heads of their governments, an extra effort to shore up pan-Arab support against the recalcitrant Gulf monarchies. Threats against Israel, vocal support for the Palestinian cause, open defiance of the West and the United States in particular, and the evocation of pan-Arab emotions all served Saddam Hussein's single goal: finding a solution to Iraq's economic collapse. As will be discussed below, Iraq's chemical arsenal and other unconventional weaponry played a crucial role in making Hussein's populist claims credible. The real question was whether Israel was the actual object of the threats.

---

<sup>30</sup> P. Salinger; E. Laurent, *op. cit.*, 1991, pp. 46-51.

<sup>31</sup> Document as reproduced in: P. Salinger; E. Laurent, *op. cit.*, 1991. pp. 279-288.

### **Legitimising chemical weapons**

Any threat with chemical weapons Iraq made had to be taken seriously. It possessed a proven capability and had demonstrated the political will to employ such weapons in defiance of international laws of war and humanitarian law. By the end of the first Gulf war it had developed a variety of delivery means, including, it was widely believed, a warhead for a ballistic missile giving it the potential to strike at non-contiguous countries or distant heartlands. In a framework of nuclear deterrence developed in the East-West context, many viewed Iraq's armament drive as a quest for a chemical first-strike capability. Rhetoric from Baghdad was thus interpreted accordingly.

The first Gulf war ended in an ambivalent way. While the international community was edging Iran and Iraq closer to the negotiating table during the summer of 1988, it sacrificed the moral authority of the 1925 Geneva Protocol to preserve the peace process. In May 1987, the Security Council had adopted Resolution 612, which envisaged the immediate investigation of allegations of chemical warfare by one of the warring parties and offered guarantees to prevent repetition. The second part remained dead letter, especially as regards claims of use by Iraq's Kurdish minority. On 26 August 1988, six days after the cease-fire had been called, the Security Council again condemned the use of chemical weapons in the analogous Resolution 620, but failed to name Iraq. September 1988 was to prove a crucial month for developments in the next couple of years. On the 16th, Iraq refused a United Nations investigation team access, defying Resolution 620. This induced the United States to sound out other countries on an international conference on chemical warfare, without singling out any one state.<sup>32</sup> Fear was great at the time that the disarmament negotiations in Geneva would falter.

The ambiguity developed along two tracks. On the one hand, Israel interpreted the lack of response from the international community as a source of justification for the Arabs to pursue chemical armament programmes. On 20 July 1988 Defence Minister Yitzhak Rabin warned Arab countries not to use chemical weapons against Israel, or they would be hit back a hundred times harder.<sup>33</sup> This followed Israeli threats in January to take out Syrian chemical weapons facilities,<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> D. Oberdorfer, *US Tests Waters for Conference on Poison Gas*. The Washington Post, 21 September 1988, p. 23.

<sup>33</sup> Jerusalem domestic radio, 20 July 1988, as reported in *Arms Control Reporter*, November 1988, p. 704.B.298.

<sup>34</sup> The Chief of the Soviet Chemical Troops, Vladimir Pikolov, visited Syria on 24 March 1988, leading to US speculation that the USSR was involved in a renewed Syrian chemical warfare effort. Some two weeks later, Syria was reported to have completed loading and fielding the first chemical warheads for their Soviet-built missiles. (*Arms Control*

and low-level practice bombing runs in April, which US intelligence sources interpreted as preparations for the attack.<sup>35</sup> Later, the international press widely reported civil defence exercises. Although Arab countries, and in particular those neighbouring Iraq, felt uneasy about Iraq's military might, the Israeli deterrence rhetoric and hints of nuclear retaliation probably caused them to close ranks, at least at the declaratory level. President Saddam Hussein would eventually exploit Israel's susceptibility to external threats in his bid for Arab leadership.

The second track of ambiguity follows from the joint Arab, Soviet, Western, and US support for Iraq against the exportation of Iran's Islamic Revolution. The unfolding of the debate between the US Congress that favoured strong sanctions against Iraq and the Reagan Administration who opposed it, contributed to the widening rift between the Arab and Western world. Western criticism and accusations stunned the political leaders in Baghdad, who issued strong denials about chemical warfare against the Kurds. Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz stated that Iraq *"respects and abides by all provisions of international law and international agreements accepted by the international community"*, which also included the 1925 Geneva Protocol. Other Arab states expressed grave doubts about the US motives for suddenly accusing Iraq while keeping quiet for years. They also praised Iraq for her renewed commitment to the Geneva Protocol.<sup>36</sup> These countries based their appraisal to a large extent on comments by Turkish doctors and officials that they had not seen victims of chemical warfare amongst the thousands of Kurdish refugees in Turkish camps. The Arab group in the United Nations protested against the dispatch of a UN investigative team to northern Iraq, claiming that this is interference in the domestic affairs of an Arab member of the United Nations. Baghdad quickly seized the opportunity and applauded the Arab support as an *"important qualitative move in contemporary Arab life"*. The stance would enable the Arab nation to face the dangers threatening its existence and the Iraqi victory *"had laid down the basis for a new Arab state after years of deterioration, disintegration and absence of Arab solidarity"*. Baghdad portrayed the criticism as yet another American-Zionist plot.<sup>37</sup>

---

*Reporter*, April 1988, p. 704.B.276)

<sup>35</sup> *Arms Control Reporter*, May 1988, p. 704.B279.

<sup>36</sup> (-), *'Source' Voices Regret over Anti-Iraq Campaign*. Broadcast on Manama WAKH (Bahrein), 13 September 1988. Translated from Arabic in FBIS-NES-88-180, 16 September 1988. p. 17. Editorial, *The Wolf Howls Again*. Al-Anba (Kuwait), 11 September 1988. pp. 1+30. Translated from Arabic in FBIS-NES-88-180, 16 September 1988. p. 18. Editorial, *A Second Front!* Al-Ahram (Cairo), 13 September 1988. p. 7. Translated from Arabic in FBIS-NES-88-180, 16 September 1988. p. 11. Editorial, *Sanctimonious Power Play*. The Jordan Times, 15 September 1988. p. 4. As quoted in FBIS-NES-88-180, 16 September 1988. p. 34.

<sup>37</sup> Iraqi News Agency, *Paper Lauds Arab Stand on US Senate Action*. 15 September 1988. Article in Al-Thawrah



In two seemingly contradictory ways, the Reagan Administration was to reinforce Iraq's linking of chemical weapons and pan-Arabism. First, while the debate over sanctions against Baghdad was raging, the Americans began expressing their concern over a large chemical weapons production plant near Rabta in Libya. In this way, they allowed the Iraqi leadership to portray Libya as yet another victimized Arab country. Second, the Administration strongly opposed the sanctions proposed by the Senate and the House of Representatives. The State Department welcomed Iraq's vow to abide by the 1925 Geneva Protocol<sup>38</sup> although earlier it had issued a statement, saying that sanctions were premature and that it preferred strong international diplomatic pressure. Press reports, however, also mentioned the strong US economic interests in Iraq. Agricultural exports had increased to about \$1 billion plus \$1.8 billion credit guarantees authorised by the government. Iraq also purchased about \$100 million worth of goods with potential military applications.<sup>39</sup> Precisely at that moment, Secretary of State Shultz was in Baghdad accusing the Iraqis of waging chemical warfare against the Kurds.<sup>40</sup> A similar incident was to occur in April 1990, when the State Department opposed trade sanctions after Iraq had repeatedly threatened Israel with chemical attacks.<sup>41</sup>

This confusing approach towards Iraq was to continue right up to the invasion of Kuwait. By the end of September 1988, both the Senate and the House of Representatives had voted sanctions following a damning report from Congressional staff members who had visited the Kurdish refugees in Turkey.<sup>42</sup> However, both chambers failed to reach agreement on the final wording of the bill before the recess. President Reagan, who was firmly opposed to any sanctions, thus did not have to veto it. Despite promises to the contrary, the bill was not reintroduced the next year. Another episode sending out confusing signals were Pentagon claims that most of the Kurds killed in Halabja in March 1988 fell victim to Iranian rather than Iraqi chemical attacks. Initial assertions first appeared in the press at the end of March and early in April 1988.<sup>43</sup> Further reports, quoting

---

(Baghdad), as summarised in FBIS-NES-88-180, 16 September 1988. pp. 26-27.

<sup>38</sup> D. Oberdorfer, *op. cit.*, 21 September 1988.

<sup>39</sup> R. S. Greenberger, *House May Soften Senate-Cleared Curbs Against Iraq for Alleged Poison Gas Use*. Wall Street Journal, 16 September 1988. p. 22. D. Hess, *House Votes Sanctions on Iraq for Chemical-Weapons Use*. Philadelphia Inquirer, 28 September 1988. p. 22.

<sup>40</sup> R. S. Greenberger, *op. cit.*, 16 September 1988.

<sup>41</sup> Press reports, as summarized in *Chemical Weapons Convention Bulletin*, n°8, June 1990, p.16, entry: 20 April.

<sup>42</sup> *Chemical Weapons Use in Kurdistan: Iraq's Final Offensive*. A Staff Report to the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate. Committee Print, 100th Congress, 2nd Session, Washington, October 1988.

<sup>43</sup> State Department spokesman Charles Redman at a press conference on 23 March 1988, as summarised in *Arms Control Reporter*, April 1988, p. 704.B.275; D. B. Ottaway, *Chemicals and Missiles Alter Middle East Warfare*. Interna-

a Pentagon study, gave more detail in May 1990.<sup>44</sup> President Hussein, who one month earlier had threatened to burn half of Israel, could not have missed the political impact. The United States cast doubt on Baghdad's responsibility for the attack which worldwide has come to symbolize Iraqi war atrocities.<sup>45</sup> Together with the American repeated refusals to impose economic sanctions against Iraq for its chemical weapons use and threats, the fresh assertions must have increased the Iraqi president's belief in the legitimacy of possessing these weapons.

### **Chemical weapons in Iraq's declaratory policy**

Between August 1988 and the invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, Iraq made three major statements about chemical weapons or what was widely interpreted as regarding chemical weapons. The first was deputy prime minister and foreign minister Tariq Aziz's address to the Paris Conference on 8 January 1989, the second the official statement submitted to the Canberra Conference in September 1989, and finally, President Saddam Hussein's infamous radio address on 1 April 1990.

Tariq Aziz's statement at the Paris Conference<sup>46</sup> set out the major themes that were to recur over the next year and a half. The central element was Iraq's view that "*any call for a total ban on chemical weapons must be coupled with a call for a complete ban on nuclear weapons.*" Referring extensively to the first UN Special Session on Disarmament in 1978, he recalled the final document's appeal to nuclear weapons states "*to adopt effective steps to ensure that nuclear weapons or the threat to use them will not be employed against the states which do not possess nuclear weapons.*" The argument echoed many a debate regarding privileges some industrialised states had obtained under the Non-Proliferation Treaty and were denied to developing countries. Aziz related the argument to the Middle East. He accused Israel directly of having introduced nuclear weapons into the region and possessing chemical weapons as well as missiles that can

---

tional Herald Tribune, 6 April 1988. p. 2.

<sup>44</sup> P. E. Tyler, *Iran, Too, Faulted in Gas Attack on Kurds*. International Herald Tribune, 4 May 1990. pp. 1+4.

<sup>45</sup> The assertion is also elaborated in A. H. Cordesman, *Weapons of Mass Destruction in the Middle East*. Brassey's, London, 1991. p. 91. The author further claims that only 100-200 people were confirmed killed by poison gas, thus further eroding the symbolism of the attack which was founded on the 15,000 mostly civilian victims, including 5,000 fatalities.

<sup>46</sup> Iraqi News Agency, *Tariq Aziz Addresses Chemical Weapons Conference*. 8 January 1989. Speech translated from Arabic in FBIS-NES-89-005, 9 January 1989. pp. 31-33.

reach many important Arab cities. Aziz was thus implying that Iraq would not dismantle its chemical arsenal unless Israel destroyed its nuclear capability. Here he reiterated the affirmation early in the speech that Iraq possessed chemical weapons,<sup>47</sup> which he legitimised by noting that “*unstable and temporary peace compels countries to be ready all the time to protect their security and sovereignty within the framework of their right to self-defence.*” Aziz continued that Iraq was looking forward to a world system in which there was no need for using any sort of weapons. “*From this premise, when we possess a weapon, we do not want to use it against anybody. The aim of possessing this weapon is to protect ourselves from our enemies.*” He added - virtually a verbatim repetition of a statement made on 17 September 1988, when denying international accusations of waging CW against the Kurds<sup>48</sup> - that Iraq would abide by all rules of international and humanitarian law.<sup>49</sup> In other words, Iraq maintained a chemical arsenal for deterrence purposes and couched the policy in terms not unlike those used by NATO member states to rationalise the continued deployment of nuclear weapons.

If the policy declaration matched military doctrine, then Iraq managed a remarkable transformation of its chemical arsenal's purpose in less than six months. Throughout the first Gulf war the Iraqi army had employed chemical munitions in tactical situations or as an anti-guerrilla weapon. Despite its ability to terrorise Teheran with domestically developed extended-range Scud missiles, which - it was soon realised - could also reach most of Israel, Iraq had no proven strategic chemical capability. However, rumours that Imman Khomeiny swallowed the poisoned pill of a cease-fire because of fear for missile attacks with chemical warheads on Iranian population centres lent further credence to the reality of the threat. Many in the West accepted the essentials of the

---

<sup>47</sup> In an interview with the French newspaper *Le Figaro*, Tariq Aziz said that Iraq had the means of defending itself against the Iranian aggression and felt no culpability regarding this period. (C. Lorieux, *Désarmement nucléaire et chimique: un objectif parallèle*. Le Figaro, 13 January 1989.)

<sup>48</sup> Iraqi News Agency, *Foreign Minister Denies Chemical Weapons Use*. 17 September 1988. Translated from Arabic in FBIS-NES-88-181, 19 September 1988. p. 17. It should be noted, however, that the text did not contain a direct denial of the accusations, but an affirmation of Iraq's adherence to international agreements, including the 1925 Geneva Protocol. In the strict sense, no international treaty prohibits the use of chemical weapons against non-state actors, such as Kurdish guerrillas. An outright denial had been issued two days before by the Iraqi defence minister, Adnan Khairallah. See, P. E. Tyler, *Iraq Defiant on Charge That It Gassed Kurds*. International Herald Tribune, 16 September 1988. p. 5. W. K., *Bagdad weist Vorwürfe Zurück*. Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 16 September 1988.

<sup>49</sup> At a press conference afterwards, Tariq Aziz added that Iraq would not transfer whatever CW experience it had gained during the war to other countries. (R. Koven, *Nations Back a Chemical Weapons Ban*. Boston Globe, 12 January 1989. p. 1. E. Mortimer, *Iraq Pledge on Chemical Weapons Expertise*. Financial Times, 12 January 1989. p. 2.)

conjecture without much further scrutiny,<sup>50</sup> more so as Arab governments strongly supported Iraq's stance.

In a brief plenary statement to the Government-Industry Conference Against Chemical Weapons, held in Canberra between 19 and 22 September 1989, the head of the Iraqi delegation, Dr. Rahim Abid Al-Kital,<sup>51</sup> reiterated his country's support for the Geneva Protocol and echoed a general Third-World view regarding the rights of all states to pursue peaceful developments in the chemical industry. Again, Iraq expressly linked chemical weapons disarmament with the necessity to ban nuclear weapons and concluded: "*We would like to restate here the CWC should have effective security guarantees for all states not only against the use of chemical weapons but also against the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. This is essential in our region in the Middle East, a region marked with conflicts and disputes.*" In an oblique way, Iraq thus announced that it would not join the CWC if the issue of nuclear disarmament was not addressed simultaneously. The argument is not unlike the one often heard in the North-South context, but the implied reference to Israel's nuclear capability narrows the focus down.

The continuing linkage with Israel's nuclear capability is of particular importance. Traditionally, this has been interpreted as part of Iraq's deterrence posture aimed at avoiding a repetition of Israel's 1981 attack against the Osirak nuclear reactor. However, we wish to argue that Iraq's rhetoric was just as much, if not even more, for Arab consumption:

1. Iraq displayed the clear ambition to become the regional superpower. For more than any other reason, this motivated Iraq to invade Iran in 1980, which under the Shah had been the dominant geopolitical actor. In the course of that war, Iraq had also gone to great lengths to champion Arab causes as earlier it had championed Egypt's expulsion from the Arab League after the signing of the Camp David accords. However, as argued above, the Iraqi president followed a very narrow international political agenda between the 1988 cease-fire and the 1990 invasion of Kuwait, his main worry being the dire economy and the feared domestic social unrest. The oil-producing Arab states were the prime focus of his coinciding external and internal security concerns.

---

<sup>50</sup> See, for instance, E. Cody, *Banning Toxic Arms: Without Arabs, No Pact*. International Herald Tribune, 13 January 1989, pp. 1+2.

<sup>51</sup> Document GICCW/P/51.

2. Verbal attacks against Israel have a unifying effect on the Arab world. As is the case with so many issues, it is always far easier to be together against than for something. The elocutionary quality is important: in both the six-day war in 1967 and the Yom Kippur war in 1973 Iraq committed but a token force to the Arab military operations.
3. Israel always was and will remain a rewarding country for verbal attacks. President Saddam Hussein could count on an Israeli reaction, which enhanced the overall threat perception among all Arab states and consequently underlined the correctness of his assertions.
4. The presence of an external threat was also good for domestic consumption. It helped to justify the population's hardships and legitimised continued high defence efforts despite the cease-fire with Iran.

The four considerations provided the overall context for Saddam Hussein's infamous speech.

Recorded on 1 April 1990 at a ceremony honouring the ministers of defence and of industry and military industrialisation as well as members of the Armed Forces General Command and broadcast on Baghdad Radio the next day,<sup>52</sup> the Iraqi president claimed halfway through the long speech:

“[...] We do not need an atomic bomb. We have the binary chemical. Let them take note of this. We have the binary chemical. According to our information, only the United States and the Soviet Union have it. They still have not reached an agreement with respect to its disarmament. It exists in Iraq. So that the Iraqis may know, it existed during the last period of war - I believe during the last year of the war. It was there. In spite of this, we did not use it against the Iranians. We did not use it against the Iranians. We said that the weapons we had were more than enough, and hoped that God would enable us to liberate our land without it.

“Why then do we need the atomic bomb? [...]”

Near the end, he said:

“[...] Why did the English not remember human rights when they partitioned Palestine [...]? Only now do they remember human rights - regarding the spy Bazoft. The English have not spared a nation on earth from their problems. They charted maps and left things unsettled to create problems. Only Bazoft is a human being. But when Bazoft passes intelligence to the Zionist entity in order for it to accurately hit a plant

---

<sup>52</sup> Baghdad Domestic Service, *President Warns Israel, Criticizes US* Translated from Arabic in FBIS-NES-90-064, 3 April 1990. pp. 32-36.

and kill maybe 200 or 300 people ... These do not count as human beings and the 17 million have no right to defend themselves.

“Look, Iraqis and Arabs, look at how you are regarded. You are not considered human beings. Only their agents and spies are looked upon as humans. According to them, they are more entitled to rights than an entire people or nation. [...] They will be deluded if they can imagine that they can give Israel a cover in order to come and strike at some industrial metalworks. By God, we will make fire eat up half of Israel if it tried against Iraq.

“Everyone must know his limits. Thanks be to God, we know our limits and we will not attack anyone. Neither will we become conceited or forget our humanitarian responsibility, or our national and pan-Arab responsibilities. However, the others must also not forget their humanitarian responsibilities. Anyone who tries to belittle Iraq - and we will not say any more than what we have said - will have only himself to blame. This time we will deal with them in this way.”

The allusion to the dual chemical and the imagery of fire eating the half of Israel in one speech caused consternation in the West and Israel, not in the least because both items were interpreted in relation to each other. However, given the number of other topics covered between the two items in the lengthy speech, did the Iraqi president hint at striking Israel with chemical weapons?

The first component is what has been translated as ‘binary chemical’,<sup>53</sup> in Arabic *al-kimawi al-muzdawij*. Arabic has no equivalent term for ‘binary’, which means that the concept was immediately subject to a technical interpretation and at that one which is not entirely surprising in view of the heated debates in the United States and NATO on the American binary chemical-weapons production programme.<sup>54</sup> An article in *Defense and Foreign Affairs Weekly* stated that the actual nature of the dual chemical President Hussein referred to is unknown and offered seven possible interpretations, some more plausible than others:<sup>55</sup>

1. Iraq possesses the means to deliver both nerve agents (lethal) and mustard agents (incapacitating).

---

<sup>53</sup> (-), *Iraqis Surprise Analysts*. Jane’s Defence Weekly, Vol. 13, n°15, 14 April 1990. p. 686.

<sup>54</sup> Perhaps even more surprising, in Israel the Arab term was also translated into a Hebrew equivalent of ‘binary gas’. The language does not have an exact equivalent of ‘binary’ in the American sense and translations of Hussein’s speech were done directly from Arabic into Hebrew. Yet, an article in Hebrew commented: “*Husayn also created a surprise yesterday when he revealed he has binary gas: namely, a lethal gas made up of ‘innocent’ materials which are stored separately. The fusion of these materials into a lethal gas is done in the bomb or the missile warhead after they have been launched toward their targets.*” (R. Ben-Yishay, *One Ought to Believe Him*. Yedi’ot Aharonot, 3 April 1990. Translated from Hebrew in FBIS-NES-90-065, 4 April 1990. pp. 29-30.)

<sup>55</sup> (-), *Iraq’s Chemical Threat: Beyond the Rhetoric*. Defense and Foreign Affairs Weekly, 16-22 April 1990. p. 3.

2. Iraq possesses the means to deliver both chemical and biological agents.
3. Iraq possesses a weapon that contains a nerve agent and a blistering agent in separate compartments, containers or submunitions, thus creating a dual chemical weapon.
4. Iraq is mixing two chemical agents together in order to achieve some perceived advantage.
5. 'Dual chemical' refers to the dissemination of mustard as both a finely divided aerosol for lethal effects and as large droplets for long-term incapacitation.
6. 'Dual' may refer to a binary agent of the US variety wherein two less toxic chemicals are mixed within a munition, in flight, to produce a highly toxic nerve agent.
7. 'Dual chemical' may refer to a compound that, when mixed with an alcohol, produces both a nerve agent and phosgene oxime, a powerful blistering agent.

The article concluded that "*while each of the preceding seven 'dual chemical' weapons are possibilities and deserve careful scrutiny, it seems likely that when the smoke finally clears, President Hussein will have accomplished exactly what he probably set out to do, namely, deter a strike against Iraq's nuclear related facilities and force Israel to spend scarce money on civil defence.*" Although the article did not clarify why 'dual chemical' and Israel should be associated, it demonstrated that the commonly used translation of 'binary chemical' is too narrow an interpretation.

However, had the precise meaning of the term in Arabic been known, this would have merely specified a (novel?) type of weaponry in Iraq's chemical arsenal but not why it would have posed an enhanced threat to Israel. Since the end of the 1st Gulf war in 1988 both Israel and the Arab states have introduced modern weapon systems in the region capable of hitting population centres and military targets beyond the horizon with greater precision, thus continually influencing and altering the balance of terror.<sup>56</sup> Semantic analysis of the speech, therefore, may provide some insight into what President Saddam Hussein actually meant.

First, the term certainly hinted at Iraq's mastery of high technology. This is consistent with the reference to the United States and the USSR, the militarily and technologically most advanced countries. In that sense, the term need not denote a particular weapon system; it served a different

---

<sup>56</sup> Z. Shiff, *The New Balance of Deterrence*. Ha'aretz, 9 April 1990. Translated from Hebrew in Middle East International, n°374, 27 April 1990. pp. 20-21. Y. Sayigh, *The Middle East Strategic Balance. I. Putting It into Perspective*. Middle East International, n°376, 25 May 1990. pp. 15-16. P. de La Gorce, *La défense israélienne en état d'alerte*. Le Monde Diplomatique, September 1990. p. 12.

function. It also underscored the chemical arsenal's increasingly political role as a symbol of Iraq's Arab leadership, as an instrument of deterrence and coercion and as a trump card at peace or disarmament negotiations. In all three areas, the term aimed at placing Iraq on an equal footing with the superpowers. Saddam Hussein's speech thus confirmed what Iraq had previously declared at the Paris and Canberra Conferences.

Second, in the passage there was no reference whatsoever to Israel. Quite on the contrary, Hussein repeated the phrase "*It exists in Iraq*" and juxtaposed it with "*So that the Iraqis may know, [...]*". In other words, the paragraph contained an important message for domestic consumption, namely, the Iraqis need not suffer an inferiority complex because they are among the world's leaders. Moreover, these phrases were also juxtaposed with the declaration of the weapon's non-use against the Iranians. The president thus countered world opinion regarding Iraq's barbaric and inhumane modes of warfare. Yet, the reference enhanced the weapon's image of dreadfulness.

Finally, the paragraph is wedged into a discussion of international accusations that Iraq was pursuing an atomic-weapons programme. Only days before the speech US and British customs had successfully completed a sting operation in which nuclear detonators destined for Iraq were seized at London's Heathrow airport. Israel and the United States then reacted by calling for strong stance against Baghdad. By 'admitting' to a terrible chemical weapon the Iraqi president declared that Iraq did not need the atomic bomb, thus refuting the allegations of nuclear-weapons research and production.

The remainder of the speech does not touch on chemical weapons until allegedly near the end when the Iraqi president promised that fire would eat up half of Israel if it dared to strike against Iraq. The basic question of course is why 'fire' should refer to CW? This interpretation was essentially drawn from a brief summary of Hussein's speech by the Iraqi News Agency that placed both parts in close apposition: "*President affirmed: [...] Whoever threatens us with the atomic bomb, we will annihilate him with the binary chemical*".<sup>57</sup> This version was widely quoted in the

---

<sup>57</sup> FBIS-NES, 3 April, as quoted in *Chemical Weapons Convention Bulletin*, Issue n°8, June 1990, pp. 13-14 at entry 1 April.



international press.<sup>58</sup> The already cited article in *Defence & Foreign Affairs Weekly* quoted President Hussein thus:

“... By God we will make fire eat up half of Israel if it tried (to strike?) against Iraq. We do not need an atomic bomb, we have the dual chemical. According to our information, only the United States and the Soviet Union have it ... it (the dual chemical) exists in Iraq.”

In Israel, certain opinions reinforced the imagery associated with ‘fire’. One commentary stated that the speech left “*no doubt that in a future conflagration with Israel, Iraq will try to attack Israel's civilian population with toxic gases.*”<sup>59</sup>

Although such interpretations might possess validity, stating that Iraq would attack Israel with chemical weapons was probably not the Iraqi president's intention. The most direct clue comes from a speech delivered to delegations of workers participating in a meeting of the Central Council of the International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions on 18 April.<sup>60</sup> Again the main theme was the Arab's inferiority in Western eyes. He only referred once to chemical weapons in the long address: because the West suddenly found “*that the Arabs, too, can deal with modern arms to an excellent degree and that they actually have managed this technology and given it a national and pan-Arab identity [...] they have created such a great uproar over the binary chemicals. They thought they could strike us. [...]*” The next passage dealt at some length with Iraq's missile capability and production base. No reference whatsoever is made to chemicals. Further on, he stated: “*I would like to explain the characteristics of the weapons we have so you will not see any Iraqi excuses. Our missiles can reach Israel, and our planes also can reach Israel. [...]*” The

---

<sup>58</sup> For instance: A. Cowell, *Baghdad Boasts of New Arms*. International Herald Tribune, 3 April 1990. pp. 1+7. D. Williams; N. B. Williams Jr., *Mideast Edges into Balance of Terror Mode*. Los Angeles Times, 4 April 1990. pp. A1+A8. Editorial, *A Crude Iraqi Threat*. International Herald Tribune, 5 April 1990. p. 4. A. M. Rosenthal, *Iraq's Threat Is as Clear as 'Mein Kampf'*. International Herald Tribune, 6 April 1990. p. 5. A. Cowell, *Iraq's Resurging Belligerence*. International Herald Tribune, 6 April 1990. p. 6. D. Raviv; Y. Melman, *Iraq's Arsenal of Horrors*. The Washington Post, 8 April 1990. pp. B1+B4. M. R. Gordon, *Greater Threats from Lesser Powers*. New York Times, 8 April 1990. pp. E1+E3. L. Thurgood, *Chemical Arms Threat by Iraq*. The Guardian Weekly, Vol. 142, n° 14, 8 April 1990. p. 9. N. Jaber, *The Iraq-West Confrontation: Background and Reactions*. Middle East International, n° 373, 13 April 1990. p. 3. P. Hiett, *Falling into Line*. Middle East International, n° 373, 13 April 1990. p. 5.

<sup>59</sup> R. Ben-Yishay, *op. cit.*, 3 April 1990.

<sup>60</sup> Iraqi News Agency, *Saddam Comments on Binary Chemicals, Missiles*. 19 April 1990. Translated from Arabic in FBIS-NES-90-076, 19 April 1990. pp. 23-25.

speech continued on human rights issues and Western hypocrisy. Again, no hint of potential strikes with CW agents against Israel.

Indirect substantiation of the conclusion comes from the reported diplomatic missions by Saudi ambassador to Washington, Prince Bandar bin Sultan.<sup>61</sup> Called to Baghdad by the Saudi King Fahd to act as an intermediary between the Iraqi and American presidents, Saddam Hussein reportedly told the ambassador that he was shocked by the American overreaction to his speech of 1 April. He claimed that he had been misunderstood and that no offensive strike had been meant, justifying his rhetoric with the explanation that he was addressing a meeting where passions were running high and that “*it never hurt in the Arab world to attack Israel.*” He further explained that “*Israel was the natural lightning rod for creating a crisis atmosphere*”, which he deemed necessary because “*the Iraqi people were getting relaxed.*” He also sent his personal assurances to President Bush that he would not attack the Jewish state. Whether the answer was a genuine expression of anguish or a justification *post hoc*, the Iraqi president admitted to his populist appeal to the Iraqi and Arab masses. This fits in with the analysis made earlier of his political motives for the invasion of Kuwait.

On the other hand, the speeches of 1 and 18 April contained a strong dose of deterrence rhetoric. The passages on Israel held conditional clauses: only if Israel or the West struck first would Iraq carry out its threat. President Hussein aimed his statement of deterrence at two distinct levels. The first had a direct bearing on a quick succession of incidents in March 1990. On 15 March, Iraq hanged the British journalist Bazoft on charges of spying for Israel in preparation of surgical strikes, leading to an outcry in the West. Seven days later, Gerald Bull, a Canadian scientist helping Iraq with long-range artillery development, was shot dead in Brussels, allegedly by the Israeli secret service. The murder received little public attention. That same month the United States drew international attention back to the chemical-weapons factory in Libya. On 29 March, finally, the electronic capacitors were intercepted at Heathrow. According to sources close to the Iraqi president, the combined events led him to believe that there existed a global conspiracy against him and that an Israeli raid comparable to the one in 1981 was imminent.<sup>62</sup> On

---

<sup>61</sup> B. Woodward, *The Commanders*. Simon & Schuster, New York, 1991. pp. 199-204.

<sup>62</sup> N. Jaber, *op. cit.*, 13 April 1990. p. 3. P. Salinger; E. Laurent, *op. cit.*, 1991. p.32. The Iraqi president also expressed his fears of a world conspiracy against him to a visiting delegation of American senators on 12 April, to which the Republican Senator from Wyoming, Alan Simpson, replied that there was no problem between him and the American people, but that the problem lay with an arrogant American press. The delegation's leader, Senator Robert Dole concurred

the 30th, it was reported in the American press that Iraq had constructed fixed Scud-launchers in the western part of the country, a move intelligence sources interpreted as “*a blunt statement by Iraq that it will retaliate against any Israeli attack on its chemical weapons or nuclear installations*”.<sup>63</sup> The characteristics of the launchers, fixed rather than mobile, may be seen as a statement of deterrence rather of escalating hostility on Iraq's part. The next day, the Iraqi president delivered his diatribe. There is no direct confirmation from the speeches nor circumstantial evidence from other sources that Iraq intended chemical retaliation against an Israeli preemptive attack.

On the second level, chemical weapons played the central role. While denying the quest for an atomic bomb, Iraq signalled that with its claimed advanced chemical weapons it had achieved strategic parity with Israel and thus a new regional balance of power comparable to the one in the East-West context. After the declarations at the Paris and Canberra conferences the previous year, Saddam Hussein closed the circle of transforming his chemical arsenal from battlefield into political weapons. On this level, he received widespread support from Arab countries, which, in doing so, recognised Iraq's leadership in this area. However, as stated before, this leadership role did not help him address his central concern.

### **Concluding remarks**

In the present presentation, we have attempted to interpret the significance of Iraq's chemical threat in the context of the broader political and strategic rivalry in the Middle East. A decision-making pattern much more complex than usually presented has emerged. During the two years between the two Gulf wars, the Ba'ath regime's internal and external security concerns increasingly began to overlap as a consequence of the country's economic collapse. Iraq's proven chemical capability and known willingness to use it on the battlefield played an important role in limited areas on different levels of its overall scheme to obtain massive Arab economic aid. On the strategic level, chemical weapons supported Iraq's claim to Arab leadership because it was welcomed by other Arab states as a deterrent to Israel's presumed nuclear arms. This was concretised in the

---

and denounced a highly critical report of Iraq broadcast by *The Voice of America*. (*Ibidem*, p. 39.)

<sup>63</sup> M. R. Gordon, *Iraq Said to Construct Launchers for Missiles in Range of Tel Aviv*. *The New York Times*, 30 March 1990. p. A4.

formal positions adopted at international conferences on chemical warfare. On the tactical level, Iraq achieved this aim by presenting itself as the victim of Western interference after harsh criticism for the chemical attacks against the Kurds in the late summer of 1988. The resulting unconditional support by other Arabs enabled Baghdad to transform its battlefield chemical weaponry into a political instrument, which in turn made its claims on the strategic level credible. Later, Saddam Hussein used the credibility of his threat against outside powers to rouse popular Arab support inside and outside Iraq, thus further constraining opposition by other Arab leaders to his bid for leadership. However, while accepting Iraq's role on the international scene, other Arab leaders did not accept Baghdad's dictate on intra-Arab affairs. Here, chemical weapons had no compelling influence whatsoever. It may even be argued that the whole strategy of coercion failed because the central protagonists were playing by different rules.

Nonetheless, the two years had an important impact on the overall security perception in the Middle East in general and on the future role of chemical weapons in the region in particular:

1. The lack of response from the Western world in particular to the use of chemical weapons by Iraq during the first Gulf war, and more importantly, against the Kurds after the cease-fire, contributed significantly to legitimising these weapons.
2. The inconsistency of the criticism, especially that being voiced in September 1988 and afterwards, confused the Arab countries. They interpreted the attacks along the US-Israeli versus Arab cleavage. Arab countries started backing Iraq unconditionally, thus effectively deflecting all further criticism of chemical warfare and armament.
3. Within this context, Iraq was able to transform its chemical arsenal into a political weapon. In the statement to the Paris conference in January 1989, Iraq added *de facto* reservations to its adherence to the Geneva Protocol. They were in terms of threat to overall security and *not* to retaliation in kind. Iraq conveniently used Israel to retain Arab support while this transformation was in process.
4. Given Iraq's economic predicament after the first Gulf war, its reliance on external sources for weaponry as well as its inability to regenerate its military-technological base and the high maintenance and servicing costs of modern conventional weaponry, the country would increasingly have to rely on cheaper chemical - and later nuclear - weapons to preserve and perhaps enhance its stature. This reinforced Iraq's need to turn chemical weapons into a political weapon.

5. When the world at large became concerned about Iraq's arsenals it focused entirely on the narrow military/strategic threat. It missed the point that meanwhile these weapons served completely different goals in Iraq's domestic and geopolitical policies. Therefore, the motives for President Bush's renunciation of CW under all circumstances, namely the nature of the Allied victory against Iraq and the technological superiority of the conventional weaponry,<sup>64</sup> were precisely the wrong ones. Moreover, they encouraged developing countries to acquire sophisticated conventional weapon systems.
6. The failure to recognise the shift in the function of chemical weapons has created a completely different psychological and geopolitical situation in the Middle East. There now is a polarisation over nuclear and chemical weapons, which may entail negative consequences when the CWC will be opened for signing or when the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty comes up for review in 1995.

---

<sup>64</sup> United States Information Service, *US Will Forswear CW Use Once Treaty Is in Force*. USIS Presidential Text, EUR102. Embassy of the United States of America, Brussels, 14 May 1991. Editorial, *All These Fearful Arms*. International Herald Tribune, 17 May 1991. p. 8.