

Book Reviews**IRAQ: Eastern Flank of the Arab World**

by Christine Moss Helms

Published by: The Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C.
208 pp; \$28.95 cloth; \$9.95 paper; 1985

At the end of 1979 when the fall of the Shah of Iran was imminent, all eyes were set on Iraq. Iraq was then seen as the new giant of the Gulf. It had remained completely aloof from all the major inter-Arab disputes and controversies for almost a decade and had exclusively focused its attention on its own socio-economic development. Its development performance during the 1970s had been phenomenal. Iraqi economic planning was rated by international development experts as the most prudent, rational and well-implemented in the entire Middle East. Notwithstanding—or perhaps because of—its oppressive political apparatus, the Ba’thist state had imposed a code of strict, puritanical financial ethics on its international economic transactions. Iraqi development experience was thus regarded as unique in the Third World in that it was the least hog-tied by malpractices, pay-offs and personal empire-building by the leadership.

Iraq in 1979 was thus a nation with great promise. The size of its oil reserves and potential oil revenues, its capacity for sustained economic development based on a non-oil economy, and its vast water resources that offered the possibility of an expanded economic base in both agriculture and industry, were some of the major advantages Iraq enjoyed over other Arab oil-producing states. Its geographical position bordering Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Syria, Jordan, Turkey, and Iran placed it in an area of great geostrategic concern for both regional and global powers. Its pivotal position between Israel to the west and the Gulf to the east, where it forms what Christine Moss Helms has called “the eastern flank of the Arab World” was regarded as unique in the Middle East.

But then, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein took the greatest gamble of his life—and lost. He misjudged the vulnerability of the newly installed Islamic Republic of Iran under the leadership of Ayatullah Khomeini and, believing in his own rhetoric about the invincibility of the Iraqi armed forces, decided to invade Iran on some flimsy pretexts. Five and a half years after the war

which was started to overthrow the Khomeini regime in Tehran and to teach the "mad Mullah" a crushing lesson, Khomeini's regime is not only intact but has consolidated its power and has shown tremendous capacity to continue an increasingly costly war. Iraq, on the other hand, is militarily and financially exhausted and is desperately seeking ways and means to end the war of attrition which has laid bare its built-in weaknesses. With a relatively small population of about 15 million, compared with Iran's 44 million, Iraq cannot possibly afford to prolong a war in which human waves have played a more critical role than arms and ammunition. The acute shortage of draft-age Iraqis, coupled with the disruption of socio-economic development programs as a result of the war, has forced Saddam Hussein to drastically revise his foreign policy positions. Iraq has abandoned its opposition to the Camp David agreements in order to obtain arms and men from Egypt. It has also restored diplomatic relations with the United States, hoping that Washington would extend its political and diplomatic support, if not military assistance, in its war against Iran. To keep the economy afloat and to pay for the cost of the war, Iraq has now become largely dependent on the continuing aid of those "reactionary" Arab States which were previously the targets of its revolutionary rhetoric.

Dr. Christine Moss Helms, a research associate in the Brookings Institution's Foreign Policy Studies Program, does an admirable job in her book to provide a historical perspective on many of the major developments in Iraq, including its war with Iran. Having done thorough research in primary sources, including extensive field trips and interviews with major political figures in Iraq, and a careful use of secondary literature, Dr. Helms has tried to go beyond today's headlines and had provided her readers with a rich and insightful background to the politics, economy, society and foreign policies of Iraq.

Dr. Helms does not agree with those who believe that Iraq, weakened by the catastrophic experience of its war with Iran, will recede into insignificance after the war is over. Even after the war is over, she maintains, Iraq will retain an important role within the region and be of growing significance to the United States, Europe, and Japan. The continuation of the war, however, will have enormous consequences for the energy economy of the West and prospects for political stability in the Arabian Gulf. But Iraq is likely to retain its potential to act as a buffer and an ally—politically, economically, and militarily—for neighbouring Arab countries.

The greatest contribution of this book is its analysis of the forces that have been instrumental in determining the structural parameters of the present Iraqi state and economy. Dr. Helms explores the role and significance of such factors as the country's geography, climate, the availability of water and, more importantly, oil reserves, which have been responsible for creating diverse regional economies within Iraq. She then relates these factors to the persistence

of tensions between a centrally organized, ideologically homogenous, and structurally monolithic state on the one hand, and the civil society on the other, which largely consists of a number of smaller autonomous social and sectarian groups. The tension between the state and the civil society is so acute and pervasive that "it affects socio-economic development, internal political consolidation, the legitimacy of the central government, and relations with neighboring countries," Helms writes. "Those who seek an explanation for the war with Iran will find the beginning of it here."

Dr. Helms believes that Iraq's geography and resources, its pluralism—as reflected not only in its diverse regional economies but also in numerous cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups—and its historical position as a frontier region, will continue to determine the internal and external policies of the Iraqi government regardless of the ideologies of the ruling elite. This, indeed, is the central thesis of the book, and herein also lies the great strength and success of the study. Dr. Helms' extraordinary ability to combine the methodological tools of structural Marxism and her British training (a Ph.D. from Oxford) in handling historico-descriptive data with the American social science emphasis on behavioural aspects of a political system, has given us a definitive work on Iraq. But the theoretical significance of Dr. Helms' study goes beyond its immediate focus on Iraq. Building on her earlier work on Saudi Arabia, Helms opens for us in the present study new theoretical avenues to understand the structural antecedents of the processes of state formation in "new nations." The book will thus be of much interest to those political scientists who are looking for new ideographic studies to inform their comparative research on state formation.

Helms' social-structural analysis of the history, economy, politics, and statecraft in Iraq is further strengthened by her sensitivity to the subjective perceptions and popular aspirations that both motivate and constrain the Iraqi ruling elite in their domestic and foreign policy options. These perceptions and aspirations, according to Helms, are shaped by a history of foreign intervention in domestic affairs; historical experiences that are predominantly Islamic and Arab; post-Ottoman notions of nationalism; expectations of rising living standards; tensions created by the pluralist nature of society; and by the interaction of competing political ideologies. It is in this context that she analyses in depth the evolution of the Arab Ba'th Socialist Party which has dominated Iraqi political life since 1968. The history of the party is outlined with reference to the ideological predispositions of its founding members, other political forces in the society, and the many deviations from its original theoretical formulations which it was forced to make as a ruling party.

Helms devotes a major part of her study to an analysis of the causes of the war between Iran and Iraq. She believes that it is not simply a war over borders but stems primarily from a deeper conflict between two competing ideologies: Arab nationalism and Islamic conservatism. It is true, as Helms

states, that the fundamental cause of the fighting was a perceived threat from revolutionary Iran to the Ba'th party and its ability to continue to govern the Iraqi state and maintain its hegemony over other politico-ideological forces in the society. It will not be correct, however, to link these "perceived threats," which were no doubt stirred up by the irresponsible statements of some Iranian leaders in their post-revolutionary euphoria, to the conflict between two competing ideologies. Arab nationalism today is a spent force. Even during its period of primary influence in the Nasser era, the ideology of Arab nationalism had failed to meet successfully both the external threats to the integrity of the Arab World and the internal challenges of political development, nation building, and socio-economic progress. Today, it is not Arab nationalism that the forces of Islamic resurgence are up against, since the ideological foundations of Arab nationalism have already been shaken by its own internal contradictions and historic failures. The fact that some Arab states are still under the control of those groups which use the rhetoric of Arab nationalism as their legitimating ideology does not, in any way, certify the well-being of the ideology itself. The processes through which the Ba'thists in Syria and Iraq have effectively integrated the party with the coercive apparatuses of the state and used the military to keep themselves in power, remain largely external to ideological problematics and are thus not relevant to measuring the political vitality of Arab nationalism.

The analytic parts in the concluding chapters of the book pick up their own policy momentum when Dr. Helms argues for closer relations between Iraq and the West and identifies areas of common strategic interests between Iraq and the United States. A measure of strategic cooperation has already been demonstrated during the Iran-Iraq war with the United States sending clear signals that it regards the political, territorial, and economic viability of Iraq as vital to its own strategic goals in the Gulf region. Iraq will certainly play a significant role in maintaining a military balance on the northern side of the Gulf and will continue to assert its geostrategic importance as the eastern flank of the Arab World, but it is unlikely that it would like to be counted among the pro-Western Arab countries. Dr. Helms believes that the West can improve its relations with Baghdad by expressing a commitment to the territorial integrity of nations and respect for the principle of non-interference in the domestic affair of other countries.

In conclusion, this book is an important and timely contribution to the modern history and politics of Iraq. Its cool, clinical analysis and non-polemical formulations separate it from most of the writings currently being produced on the Middle East. It is a gracefully written, serious work of scholarship which should be of substantial benefit to scholars of the Middle East.

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