

## The Coming War with Iraq

War has been called "business by other means". This is an oversimplification, of course. Undoubtedly, economic conflict over material resources, markets, trade routes and so on, is a crucial factor in modern war but it does not operate in isolation; the ruling ideas of society play a role too. Without significant support for war in our society it would be much more difficult to wage a war. That's why our "great" leaders spend so long trying to convince us, and scare us, into thinking that war is both acceptable and inevitable. It is neither.

### Bogus reasons for war

People are right to be cynical about the claims of the warmongering politicians. Most realise that this is not really a dispute about "weapons of mass destruction" (which are, probably, exclusively held by the United States and its allies in this conflict given that, according to UNSCOM arms inspectors, Iraq had already lost 90-95% of its WMD by 1998). It can't be about the supposed links between Iraq and Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda terrorist network (which remain unproven or extremely tenuous), nor about Iraq's non-compliance with UN resolutions (which the US – and its ally, Israel – have repeatedly flouted themselves). It can't even be about the alleged military threat that Iraq poses to the West (which is plain daft since the regime knows very well that it would be totally outgunned and completely obliterated if it tried to make good such a threat).

### The significance of oil

In contrast, there are apparently compelling reasons for thinking that what lies behind the determination to topple Saddam Hussein has to do with oil. Consider the facts:

Iraqi oil production is currently 3 million barrels per day (compared to 77 million for the world as a whole). Nevertheless, Iraq has the second largest reserves in the world and, what's more, these reserves are of a relatively high quality and easily extractable. If export controls were lifted and investment was allowed into the country it is estimated that Iraq would be able to supply 10% of the world's oil needs, and do so for at least a century. At the same time, as Robert Fisk has noted; "The US Department of Energy announced at the beginning of this month that by 2025, US oil imports will account for perhaps 70 per cent of total US domestic demand (it was 55 per cent two years ago). As Michael Renner of the Worldwatch Institute put it recently; "US oil deposits are increasingly depleted, and many other non-Opec fields are beginning to run dry. The bulk of future supplies will have to come from the Gulf region." No wonder the whole Bush energy policy is based on the increasing consumption of oil. Some 70 per cent of the world's proven oil reserves are in the Middle East." (*The Independent*, January 18, 2003).

Thus, it is easy to see why, when the US announced that it's goal in Iraq was regime change, *The Times* should have run headlines like the "West sees glittering prizes ahead in giant oilfields" (11.07.02). Removing Saddam would open Iraq's rich new oilfields to western bidders, lessen dependence on Saudi oil and undermine OPEC's ability to "hold the West to ransom". Which is why oil companies have already begun to strike deals with Iraqi political groups in exile.

### Against "Anti-Americanism"

Nevertheless, this does not justify the kind of facile anti-Americanism which is becoming increasingly prevalent, identifying "America" as the problem and as the real threat to peace. The problem in fact originates at a deeper level; it springs from the competitive nature of global capitalism in which every state on the face of the earth is implicated. Ironically, this "Anti-Americanism" which sees the problem in simplistic national terms is consistent with a kind of nationalistic outlook that governments themselves encourage and rely upon in their efforts to promote war. It induces us to take sides — against America and, by implication, with Iraq — in a conflict which is irrelevant to the interests of the vast majority of people on both sides.

It is unquestionably true that Saddam Hussein heads a vicious, brutal and murderous regime that has no hesitation about using whatever it takes to keep itself in power. The sooner it goes, the better — not least for the Iraqi population in general. But our opposition to this regime does not require us to support its western enemies; the enemy of an enemy is not necessarily a friend.

### Motive and consequences

What these Western enemies are proposing is the use of military force to oust this regime but the reason they are proposing this is not because they have the interests of the Iraqi population at heart, many thousands of whom will certainly perish in order for the Western powers to get their way; it is rather because they have their own interests in mind. By supporting this action we would be endorsing precisely these grubby commercial motives that lie at the very heart of this proposal. We would be complicit in perpetuating the lie that Bush and Blair want to wage war on Iraq because it will ultimately benefit Iraq. Therefore we must oppose, without compromise, what they propose.

In any case, the argument that the outcome of a war against Iraq will be to the advantage of its population and the wider region in the long run — even if this was not the real purpose of such a war — is far from proven. According to this argument, the replacement of the current Iraqi dictatorship by a moderate pro-western and relatively democratic government will significantly improve human rights in the country and create a stable political climate in which economic growth for the Iraqi people will be possible.

However, this is unlikely to be the case. More probably, the effect of such a devastating war will be to further destabilise an already volatile Middle East. It will serve to sow the seeds of yet more bitterness, hatred and irrational fanaticism, leaving an even larger legacy of violence for years, if not decades, to come.

As for the argument that war will bring economic benefits to the Iraqi population as a whole by creating a climate of political stability, even if this were the case this has to be balanced against the enormous devastation that war will inflict on Iraq that will take many years to redress. Following the last Gulf War, Iraq's GDP collapsed from \$68 billions in 1989 to a mere \$245 millions. There was widespread destruction of the economic infrastructure and an enormous increase in deaths through malnutrition and disease. Another war against Iraq is likely to be even more devastating since many analysts believe it will have to involve Allied ground forces in street fighting with the most fearsome of the Iraqi armed forces. According to Hamish McRae; "The highest estimates of the costs of a Middle East war, which include a sharp rise in the oil price, are around \$600bn. That would be equivalent to only about six months' natural growth. But if supplies were to be seriously disrupted and the oil price were to rise to, say, \$80 a barrel, then a serious world recession would follow." ( *The Independent* January 1, 2003 ). If this were to happen this would undoubtedly further delay the economic reconstruction of Iraq. The resulting prolongation of intense poverty can be expected to provide a fertile breeding ground for a further cycle of violence.

Add to this the ecological damage that follows every war, especially one that might easily result in the mass burning of oil wells, then as individuals we can easily fall into apathetic despair. But the world does not have to be organised this way. There is no law that says we have to compete and fight over the wealth of the planet. Consenting to how the world is organised today will continue the cycle of violence, as conflict is built into our economic system. Ultimately it's a choice the people of our world will have to make. Against the forces of the ruling economic and political classes we may seem to be powerless but when we withdraw our consent for the madness of economic competition then wars will simply stop. Now seems like a pretty good time to start.