Review by **Ibrahim Al-Marashi**, California State University, San Marcos

T his article provides new perspectives in the field of U.S.-Iraq relations, a literature that emerged during the Iran-Iraq War and grew exponentially around the 1991 Gulf Crisis. What makes this article unique and unprecedented is that while most of the literature is based on assumptions, inferences, and educated guesses about the strategic decision making of Saddam Hussein, Brands and Palkki have utilized primary documents produced by the former Iraqi President. Otherwise the scant work that is based on captured Iraqi documents and attempts to provide new insights into Saddam Hussein's thinking includes a co-authored work by the reviewer entitled "Iraqi Perceptions of the US"[1] and a recently published edited volume of recorded tapes of Hussein's sessions with his inner circle entitled, *The Saddam Tapes: The Inner Workings of a Tyrant's Regime, 1978-2001.* [2]

This article is part of the ongoing research that has come out of the efforts of the Conflict Records Research Center in Washington DC to translate, archive, and analyze a trove of Iraqi state documents seized after the 2003 Iraq War. The captured records shed considerable light on Iraqi decision-making under Saddam Hussein. After an exhaustive examination of the Center's records, I agree with this article's argument that during Saddam Hussein's reign, he perceived a consistent threat from the United States. The authors provide primary evidence to support their argument that the Iraqi leader did not feel that relations with Washington were stable. Thus, he did not view Iraq as serving as an American proxy during the Iran-Iraq War, nor that the U.S. gave him a 'green light' to invade Kuwait. These two notions have become

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[1] Ibrahim Al-Marashi and Abdul Hadi Khalili in David Farber (ed.), *What They Think of US: International Perceptions of America's War on Terror* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2007).

[2] Kevin M. Woods, David D. Palkki, and Mark E. Stout, *The Saddam Tapes: The Inner Workings of a Tyrant's Regime, 1978-2001* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011).

embedded in the academic literature and in the opinions of policy makers. Rather, Hussein, since assuming power in 1979, was always suspicious of American policy in the Middle East. Any positive impressions in Baghdad from the U.S. tilt to Iraq beginning with the trip of Donald Rumsfeld in 1983 were essentially negated by the revelation that U.S. arms reached Iran during the Iran-Contra episode. This experience, combined with his fear that the U.S. would emerge as a regional hegemon in the wake of collapsing global Soviet power, convinced Hussein by 1989 that America and its regional ally Israel posed a threat to Iraq and, more importantly, to Hussein's rule. On the eve of the invasion of Kuwait in 1990, Hussein still believed that the Americans were 'conspiring bastards' and would have never trusted a signal, direct or indirect from his meeting with U.S. Ambassador April Glaspie that he could invade Kuwait without any rebuke from Washington.

Brands and Palkki's article thus contributes two important insights to the literature on the buildup to the Gulf Crisis in 1990-1991. Joint exercises between the U.S. military and Kuwait in 1989 served as a signal to Hussein that the House of Sabah was conspiring along with the U.S. and Israel to undermine Baghdad. These military exercises are rarely mentioned in the literature on the Gulf Crisis. Second, this article debunks the "April Glaspie myth." Their conclusions from their research into the Iraqi documents reveal that Hussein was convinced of a tri-partite US-Israeli-Kuwaiti alliance against the Ba'athist state. With his deep-seated belief in this plan, Hussein's meeting with Glaspie was most likely to probe for an American reaction, rather than to seek tacit approval for his action against his southern neighbor. The 1990 invasion was a means to prevent Kuwait from emerging as an American proxy against Iraq, in addition to eliminating Iraq's debt to Kuwait that was incurred during the eight-year war, as well as giving Iraq a better strategic position at the headwaters of the Gulf.

The critique I have of the article is that the authors could have defined more precisely what they meant by Saddam Hussein's belief in conspiracy theories. The article begins by portraying the Iraqi leader as a rational decision maker when assessing and dealing with external threats to his rule: "Saddam's fears drew deeply on his ideological proclivities and personality traits. They were not entirely irrational, however, for the period of his political ascendancy furnished ample evidence of foreign encirclement." (630) However as the article progresses, it follows the repeated trope of Hussein the delusional, conspiracy prone dictator: "Saddam's anti-Semitism, his Baathist ideology, his inflated self-image, and his penchant for conspiracy thinking fundamentally distorted his perceptions of world affairs and predisposed him to see American influence in whatever misfortune befell his regime." (658) The authors suggest at some points in the article the delusional perspectives of Hussein, while at other times suggest that Hussein was rational and that some of the conspiracy theories he held had actually manifested themselves. Perhaps the problem here, as in the other literature assessing Hussein's tendency to believe in conspiracy theories, is in the framing of the conspiracy theory itself. The term can be subjective; one person's conspiracy theory is another person's truth. What Hussein saw as an American-Israeli-Kuwaiti plot was his way of explaining national threat perceptions to an Iraqi audience, both regime insiders and the Iraqi public. Perhaps a better term than "conspiracy theory" or "conspiratorial thinking" is "interpretative schemata." The documents used for this article shed light on Saddam Hussein's interpretative schemata or framework for understanding the threats

to Iraq.

Upon assuming power in 1979, Hussein had invested in an interpretive schemata that portrayed the U.S. as a consistent threat. Hussein could provide a narrative of how the U.S. sided with Israel and Iran to support the Iraqi Kurdish insurgency in the seventies, supplied arms to the Islamic Republic in the eighties, and sought to bolster Kuwait's security after the Iran-Iraq War through military maneuvers. Furthermore, the weakening of the Soviet role in the Middle East, and U.S. military exercises with Kuwait convinced Hussein that the U.S. would seek to undermine the Ba'athist state, leading to what was in his opinion a pre-emptive strike against Kuwait. This invasion set off a chain of events that made Hussein's perception of the U.S. a threat a self- fulfilling narrative. Indeed, the "conspiring bastards" Hussein feared in the eighties eventually unseated him in 2003.

Ibrahim Al-Marashi is Assistant Professor of Middle East History at California State University, San Marcos. His research deals with the security issues in the Middle East, particularly in Iraq. He is the co-author of *Iraq's Armed Forces: An Analytical History* (Routledge, 2008). He obtained his D.Phil. at University of Oxford, completing a thesis on the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. He is of Iraqi-American heritage and has lived at various times in Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen, Egypt, Morocco, and Turkey.