
URL: http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR368b-Response.pdf

[Due to an editing error, Professor Brands’s surname was misspelled in the original version of Judith Yaphe’s review. We apologize to Professor Brands for this error —ed.]

Response by Hal Brands, Assistant Professor of Public Policy and History at Duke University, and David Palkki, Deputy Director of the National Defense University’s Conflict Records Research Center (CRRC).

“The views expressed in this response are those of the authors and not necessarily those of their respective organizations.”

We are grateful to Professor Maddux for arranging two reviews of the article that we recently published on Saddam Hussein’s view of the United States, and to Ibrahim al-Marashi and Judith Yaphe, both respected Iraq experts, for their comments on our essay. Unfortunately, Yaphe’s review is deeply disappointing—not because she disagrees with some of our interpretations, which is obviously her prerogative, but because she bases her critique of our article on numerous errors, contradictory and unsupported assertions, and mischaracterizations of what we wrote. While we could pick at a large number of her claims and criticisms, we will only take on a few that we think most significant.

First and foremost, we find it illogical for Yaphe to discount the value of an archive because she disagrees with the findings of two researchers who have used the archive. Yaphe writes that in regard to the CRRC records, “There is little that is new here.” Yaphe is not in a position to make this sweeping judgment given that to our knowledge she has never conducted research at the CRRC. Without reviewing the archive’s collections, how does she know the CRRC’s Saddam Hussein collection has little that’s new? Joseph Sassoon, Amatzia Baram, and other serious Iraq scholars have conducted research at the CRRC and, as their
recent publications make clear, discovered quite a bit that’s important in the CRRC records.¹

Elsewhere in her review, Yaphe states that “more than one million documents seized by the U.S. military” are “now housed at the Conflict Records Research Center” and that we “are among the few scholars” who have been able to “singularly exploit” the CRRC records. Three basic corrections are in order: 1) the CRRC contains roughly 1,200 digital copies of captured records, not over 1 million originals; 2) the restricted U.S. Government database is widely available and easily accessible to defense and intelligence analysts throughout the U.S. Government, not only to us and Kevin Woods (the Central Intelligence Agency, RAND Corporation, and Institute for Defense Analyses have all publicly released studies based on these records); 3) more than a “few scholars” have been granted access to the CRRC records. Over 100 students and scholars have conducted research at the CRRC, and the CRRC has not denied anyone access to the CRRC records who has received Institutional Review Board approval from their university.

With respect to the substance of the review, Yaphe criticizes us for refuting the argument that Saddam was an American proxy during the 1980s, or that the United States encouraged him to attack Kuwait by supporting him during the Iran-Iraq war. These arguments, she suggests, are “red herrings.” In fact, these arguments are central to the academic and public discourse on the history of U.S.-Iraq relations, as our footnotes make clear. Confusingly, elsewhere in her review Yaphe indicates that she accepts this particular “red herring.” After a brief discussion of U.S. assistance to Iraq during the war, she concludes her review as follows: “No wonder Saddam doubted anyone would care if he invaded and occupied Kuwait.” She also writes that we are “correct in saying that Washington’s support in the 1980s encouraged Saddam” to think he could get away with the “annexation of his smaller, weaker neighbor.” This flies in the face of our thesis and we wrote nothing of the sort.

Similar problems are apparent throughout the review. Yaphe criticizes us for calling the U.S.-Iraq partnership of the 1980s “tacit,” when this is exactly what it was. In its public statements, the U.S. government continually averred that it was neutral in the Iran-Iraq war; in substance, it was clearly helping Iraq. Similarly, Yaphe errs in criticizing our suggestion that the Reagan administration sought to: a) free U.S. hostages in Lebanon; and b) gain influence with Iranian "moderates" by selling arms to Tehran in 1985-86. Contrary to what Yaphe asserts, there is abundant evidence, available in the various Iran-Contra reports and numerous other sources, that this was exactly what President Ronald Reagan and those advisers who favored the plan had in mind.

Yaphe’s depiction of various aspects of the U.S.-Iraq relationship is equally problematic. At one point, she asserts that the 1982 decision to remove Iraq from the State Sponsors of

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Terrorism list was meant to pave the way for arms sales. This is incorrect. The 1982 decision was meant to pave the way for economic assistance in the form of Export-Import Bank credits and Commodity Credit Corporation guarantees. Likewise, Yaphe errs in describing the USS Stark incident as a "shoot down," as the Stark was a ship rather than an airplane. She criticizes us for not making more of this incident, but adduces no evidence to suggest that it was anything other than an accident. The evidence she does cite—Saddam’s commendation of the pilots who perpetrated the attack—does not prove malice aforethought, but it does actually support our argument about his views of the United States.

With respect, to Saddam himself, Yaphe criticizes us for not understanding his pragmatism, when throughout the article we note that his hostility toward Washington was mixed with a ruthless pragmatism. On a more specific issue, Yaphe writes that “Saddam did not seize power in 1979” since he was already running the country. Here, as with other criticisms, she misrepresents what we wrote and then addresses her straw man. We wrote that Saddam decided to “seize the presidency in July 1979” (emphasis added), which is perfectly accurate. We make clear in our recent article in International Security and other publications that we were fully aware that Saddam was already in control.²

On less substantive matters, Yaphe wrongly suggests that our interpretation owes much to Brands’ background in German military history and Palkki’s background in German history. Brands has never studied German military history. Palkki has never done scholarly work on German history.

All of these issues cast doubt on the usefulness of Yaphe’s review. Most problematic of all, however, is the theme that runs throughout the review—that there is not much to be learned from studying the Iraqi records. To be sure, our article demonstrates that one cannot rely solely on these records to interpret Saddam’s behavior, as we use numerous other sources—American archival records, Saddam’s public statements, declassified interrogation reports of Saddam, recent interviews with Saddam’s former generals, and the available secondary literature—to make sense, if only in an incomplete and provisional fashion, of what was going on in Baghdad. But if scholars are not at least open to the possibility that the new records should cause us to reconsider some important conclusions about U.S.-Iraq relations and Saddam’s statecraft more broadly, then it is hard to see how our understanding of these issues can advance in the years to come.

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