

# H-Diplo

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**Eric Jacobsen. "A Coincidence of Interests: Kennedy, U.S. Assistance, and the 1963 Iraqi Ba'th Regime."** *Diplomatic History* 37:5 (November 2013): 1029-1059. DOI: 10.1093/dh/dht049. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/dh/dht049>

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Reviewed by **Brandon Wolfe-Hunnicut**, University of California, Merced

It is interesting to note, as Nathan Citino does, that despite the fact that Iraq has been the site of America's longest and most sustained military commitments since the Vietnam War, there does not yet exist a single archival-based monograph detailing the origins of the U.S.-Iraqi relationship.<sup>1</sup> The consequences of this can be seen in Peter L. Hahn's recent book, *Missions Accomplished?*<sup>2</sup> Whereas Hahn claims that "Declassified U.S. government documents offer no evidence to support" suggestions that the Baath Party of Iraq "maintained contacts with American officials"<sup>3</sup> in the period leading up to its 1963 coup d'état, a recent article from Eric Jacobsen does a great deal to correct the record on this matter.

Jacobsen draws on these same declassified documents, in addition to invaluable oral history interviews with former policymakers, to show that American officials were indeed in close contact with Iraqi Baathists before, during, and after their 1963 putsch.<sup>4</sup> As Jacobsen explains,

<sup>1</sup> See Nathan J. Citino, "Out of the Blue? Historical Scholarship on U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East," *OAH Magazine of History* 20, No. 3 (May 2006), 11.

<sup>2</sup> *Missions Accomplished? The United States and Iraq since World War I* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). For sustained critiques of *Missions Accomplished?* see Roland Popp's contributions to H-Diplo Roundtable Review XIII, No. 26 (2012): 21-27, 33-38 <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XIII-26.pdf>; Tareq Ismael, "America's Iraq," *Diplomatic History* 37, No. 3 (2013): 605-607.

<sup>3</sup> Hahn, *Missions Accomplished?* 48.

<sup>4</sup> In so doing, Jacobsen contributes to a growing body of scholarship that arrives at the same conclusion. See, for example, Weldon Matthews, "The Kennedy Administration, Counterinsurgency, and Iraq's First Ba'thist Regime," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43, no. 4 (2011): 635-53; Brandon Wolfe-Hunnicut, "Embracing

the U.S. supported the Baath as an alternative to the government of General Abdel Karim Qasim. General Qasim had come to power in 1958 through a bloody coup that toppled Iraq's Western-backed Hashemite monarchy. Once in power Qasim initiated a series of policies that threatened U.S. interests in a number of ways: "He sought Soviet assistance, built a political coalition that include the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), reduced trade with Western nations, moved Iraq away from a capitalist economic model and toward a state-centered economy, and routinely challenged the neocolonial power of the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC), a consortium of mostly American and British oil companies partially owned by the British government" (1029).

Though President John F. Kennedy remained aloof from policymaking toward Iraq (1037), Jacobsen shows that Kennedy's State Department, Central Intelligence Agency, and National Security Council kept a close eye on developments in the country and were eager to seize any opportunity to replace the government of General Qasim. As Jacobsen explains, that opportunity arose in mid-January 1963: "the Baghdad Embassy reported that Soviet influence had grown, that Iraq was almost completely dependent on the Soviet Bloc, and that Iraqi Communists held key positions within the media and army. To end these threats to U.S. interests, Kennedy again opted to work with local actors – in this case the Iraqi Ba'ath Party – to plan Qasim's demise" (1040).

Jacobsen details the close relations between the Kennedy administration and the emergent Baathist regime in Iraq. In the days following the February 8 coup, the CIA assisted the Baath as it carried out a systematic purge of Iraqi communists (1041, 1045). At the same time, the State Department provided economic assistance – principally PL 480 wheat shipments, and encouragement to U.S. firms to invest in Iraq (1054) – in exchange for a liberalization of Iraq's trade and economic policies (1044). On the military side, the Kennedy administration ramped up U.S. arms deliveries as part of a broader effort to cultivate American influence and establish lasting bonds of debt dependence (1049-54).

In theory, this package of U.S. assistance could have served to integrate Iraq into a regional security structure and safeguarded Western access to Iraqi oil.<sup>5</sup> This is indeed what Kennedy administration officials anticipated. But as Jacobsen shows, the Kennedy administration got very little for its efforts. The Baath did indeed adopt a series of measures that won U.S. approval (largely in the sphere of economic liberalization), but these actions were not taken because of U.S. influence (1058). On the contrary, it was "merely a coincidence of interests" (1058) that compelled the Baath to take such steps. In Jacobsen's view, the Baath "would have likely taken similar actions without U.S. assistance" (1031) as part of its effort to attract foreign capital and accelerate Iraqi economic growth. Moreover, "when Iraqi interests ran contrary to those of the

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Regime Change in Iraq: American Foreign Policy and the 1963 Coup d'état in Baghdad," *Diplomatic History* (forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> It may be worth pointing out that what was at stake was not Western access to Iraqi oil, but rather the access of the major multinationals to Iraqi oil rents. For more on this distinction, see Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso, 2011), esp. chapter 6.

United States, the Ba'ath regime chose to look out for itself" (1058). The Baath demonstrated its resistance to U.S. power by, for example, continuing to purchasing Soviet and British military equipment rather entering into an exclusive relationship with U.S. suppliers, and by pushing back against U.S. loan repayment demands (1058).

Ultimately, what the U.S. did or didn't get for its investment in the Baath became moot, as the Baath itself was overthrown in a military coup after only nine months in power. In the end, the Kennedy administration's enthusiasm for what it regarded as the great "white hope of the Arab world" came to naught (1041). This does not, however, mean that the Baath's brief tenure in power was without consequence for subsequent U.S.-Iraqi relations. On the contrary, in laying bare the Kennedy administration's support for the Baath in the early 1960s, Jacobsen has elucidated one of the reasons that more recent U.S. claims to support democracy and human rights in Iraq have been greeted with so much skepticism. As recent history has shown, the 'blowback' from cold-war era intelligence operations can have a very long half-life.

As admirable as Jacobsen's article is, there are areas of the essay that could be further developed. I would have liked to see more an analysis of the policymaking process (as opposed to a more limited description of specific policy outcomes). Analyzing disagreements among policymakers can help to illuminate the ideological and institutional context out of which policy emerges and help us to understand the range of policy options available to policymakers. Not only would such an analysis allow us to better evaluate the wisdom and efficacy of supporting the Baath's rise to power, but it is likely that more attention to this dimension of U.S.-Iraqi diplomacy would draw attention to the ideology of American intervention and the role of modernization theory in shaping American perceptions of Iraq and Iraqis. Moreover, analyzing modernization as a discourse and ideology could in turn illuminate the general dynamics of American foreign policy in the early 1960s, and help explicate why the history of U.S.-Iraqi relations has been so fraught with violence.

Limitations aside, Jacobsen's article represents a very important starting point in acknowledging this history and apprehending with its implications.

**Brandon Wolfe-Hunnicut** teaches U.S. and Middle East history at the University of California, Merced. His Ph.D. dissertation, "The End of the Concessionary Regime: Oil and American Power in Iraq, 1958-1972" (Stanford University, 2011), analyzes U.S. foreign policy toward the nationalization of the Iraq Petroleum Company. His article, "Embracing Regime Change: U.S. Foreign Policy toward the 1963 Coup in Baghdad" is forthcoming from *Diplomatic History*.

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