



The Evgeny Primakov  
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Cooperation

Policy brief

# Role of Sanctions in the Overthrow of the Regime: The USA and Saddam's Iraq

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**Role of Sanctions in the Overthrow of the Regime: The USA and Saddam's Iraq**

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# Main points

- The United States used Iraq as the first precedent for the application of total sanctions, seeking to develop a mechanism for exerting pressure on undesirable regimes. This experience was intended to be used later against other countries. The main goal of the sanctions was to severely weaken Iraq's economic and military potential as a strong regional power capable of posing a threat to American hegemony in the region;
- International control mechanisms were used by the US to advance their interests and effectively implement sanctions policies. Particular emphasis was placed on eliminating Iraq's potential to use weapons of mass destruction (WMD) through international monitoring and control mechanisms: the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM), followed by the UN Monitoring, Verification, and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC). This was necessary to eliminate the military threat to American bases, Israel, and pro-American monarchies in the Persian Gulf;
- The sanctions were aimed at undermining domestic political stability by creating economic hardships for the population, fueling ethno-religious conflicts, and supporting external opposition. From a financial and economic perspective, Iraq faced a complete blockade—oil exports were severely restricted, Iraqi financial assets were frozen, and banking operations were banned (including disconnection from SWIFT, etc.).
- The ultimate goal was the overthrow of the nationally oriented leadership and the establishment of a pro-American regime. This is why a ceasefire, rather than a peace treaty, was concluded with Iraq, allowing the sanctions to continue and keeping Baghdad isolated after the end of military operations in 1991.

# 1. The Goals of U.S. Sanctions Against Iraq

The United States and its allies, primarily the United Kingdom, imposed sanctions and restrictions on Iraq with the following objectives:

- The maximum weakening of the country's economic potential, as its rapid and dynamic development began to threaten the globalist ambitions of the United States and the preservation of American regional hegemony. Iraq was actively increasing its influence in the Persian Gulf, a region rich in oil and gas, as well as in the broader Middle East. Notably, in a conversation with the author on August 23, 2002, Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz expressed the opinion that "the U.S. will not stop at Iraq and the Middle East. They need to establish control over the entire world, and they will not stop on this path until it is Russia's turn to become the main victim of American ambitions.<sup>1</sup>".
- The destruction and/or maximum weakening of Iraq's military power as the strongest regional state in the Near and Middle East, including the Persian Gulf zone, as well as the destabilization of the country's ruling elites. The consequences of this are thoroughly examined in the article by Mamedov and Morozov, «The Influence of UN and U.S. Sanctions on Iraq's Political Elite,» which rightly notes that the sanctions had a negative impact on the country's socio-economic sphere. However, they also contributed to the growth of opposition, primarily among external and internal Shiite groups, and provoked divisions within Saddam Hussein's ruling clan and his inner circle<sup>2</sup>.
- Once the sanctions had a detrimental effect on Iraq's socio-economic situation, they created favorable conditions for increasing internal tensions, ultimately leading to public discontent, a rise in public dissent, and the organization of uprisings and rebellions—both ethno-religious and military. The ultimate goal was to replace the nationally patriotic ruling elite with pro-American regimes that adhered to the ideological and spiritual values of the Western world. As Iraqi Vice President Taha Yassin Ramadan stated in a conversation with the author on June 2, 2002, "The U.S. will not allow the sanctions on Iraq to be lifted by any means, because their goal is to overthrow the country's legitimate authorities

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1 Conversation between the author and Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister T. Aziz on August 23, 2002.

2 R. Sh. Mamedov, V. A. Morozov. The Influence of UN and U.S. Sanctions on Iraq's Political Elite // MGIMO University Bulletin. – 2020. – 13(1). – pp. 129–146. – DOI: 10.24833/2071-8160-2020-1-70-129-146.

through an embargo and by inciting conflicts between Arabs and Kurds, between Sunnis and Shiites, including through the involvement of external opposition forces, and to install their puppets in Baghdad”<sup>3</sup>.

- The destruction of any potential for Iraq in the field of WMDs—this referred to eliminating the military threat posed by Baghdad to Israel and the conservative pro-Western Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf. As noted in a conversation with the author on December 12, 1998, by Major General Husam Amin At-Tikriti, Director of the Baghdad Monitoring and Control Center (Iraq’s partner with the UN Special Commission), «Washington is using Iraq to test a system of strict monitoring over the military potential of other countries, primarily in terms of controlling any WMD programs»<sup>4</sup>.

In this regard, UN Security Council Resolution 687 was adopted concerning Iraq, which not only demanded the complete destruction of any WMD potential and documentation related to their programs but also imposed a ban on the use of missiles with a range greater than 150 km. Additionally, it established a monitoring system over all of Iraq’s defense industry through the work of the UN Special Commission on Disarmament (UNSCOM)<sup>5</sup>. The mechanisms and methods of implementing Iraq’s disarmament are outlined in brief, with references to the relevant documents, in the introduction by former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali to the UN landmark compilation on the Iraq-Kuwait conflict, «The United Nations and Iraq-Kuwait Conflict 1990–1996,» published in 1996 in New York.

It is notable that even at that time, ideas began to emerge regarding the expansion of the monitoring system for Iraq’s WMDs both regionally and globally. This was, in particular, discussed at the political science level. For example, in a 1995 publication by the Kuwait Research Center titled «The Role of the United Nations in Maintaining International Peace and Security: The Case of the Iraq-Kuwait Conflict,» it was noted that «Iraq’s disarmament in accordance with the terms and provisions of Resolution 687 represents a prelude to the creation of an international or regional disarmament system. This is especially true for the destruction of weapons of mass destruction, so that this system could be applied to all countries without exception».<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Conversation between the author and Iraqi Vice President T.Y. Ramadan on June 2, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Conversation between the author and Major General Husam Amin At-Tikriti, Director of the Baghdad Monitoring and Control Center, on December 12, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 687, April 3, 1991, S/RES/687 [Electronic resource] // United Nations. – URL: [https://docs.un.org/ru/S/RES/687\(1991\)](https://docs.un.org/ru/S/RES/687(1991)) (date of access: 02.02.2025)

<sup>6</sup> The Role of the United Nations in Maintaining International Peace and Security: The Case of the Iraq-Kuwait Conflict / edited by G. L. Bondarevsky; Kuwait Research Center. – Moscow: M-OKO, 1999. – p. 48.

## 2. Strategy for Overthrowing the Regime. A Stage-by-Stage Approach

To justify the imposition of sanctions on Iraq, Washington set a trap, using Kuwait as the bait. The United States fostered a hostile atmosphere by escalating the Emirate's demands on Baghdad to repay debts for weapons purchases made during the bloody and prolonged war with Iran, which had drained both countries over the course of eight years.

A key element in this strategy was the role of «provoking» players, such as Israel and several neighboring countries, which encouraged Saddam Hussein's government to intervene in Kuwait. Internal sources of tension also played a significant role: the Kurds, Shiites, and Arab extremist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood (banned in Russia). In this way, radical Islamist sentiments and nationalism were directly stoked. It must be acknowledged that Iraq was lured into this trap, starting military actions against Kuwait, which served as the formal pretext to impose sanctions.

It is worth noting that Washington did not aim for the complete defeat of Iraq. First of all, the Americans understood from the outset that this was practically impossible. In the case of Iraq, coalition forces would have had to assault numerous large Iraqi cities, including the multi-million-strong Baghdad, Basra, and Mosul. Despite the huge losses suffered during Operation Desert Storm, the Iraqi armed forces remained relatively strong, including their ground troops, tank and artillery units. Given that, the U.S. Army would have suffered significant losses in both personnel and equipment. Moreover, the combat morale and experience of the Iraqi military, after 8 years of war with Iran, remained high, as did the general patriotic spirit of the Iraqi population, at a time when the sanctions had not yet undermined the morale of Iraqi society, which was deeply influenced by the ideology of Baathist socialism and Arab nationalism.

◆ **To weaken the power of Iraq's armed forces, it was necessary to destroy its WMD potential and missile delivery systems through the implementation of an international monitoring system and the elimination of WMD development programs and the destruction of medium- and short-range missiles. This was achieved through the creation of the UN Special Commission on Disarmament based on UN Security Council Resolution 687 and its provisions 8-13.**

Among its inspectors were representatives from Anglo-Saxon countries, who completely dominated the leadership positions, although there were also representatives from Russia, France, Germany, and several other countries, but only in middle and junior positions.

During its years of operation up until 1998, the Special Commission identified and destroyed all documentation related to WMD development, eliminated all stockpiles of chemical weapons and missiles, as well as laboratories involved in nuclear and biological weapons. Video cameras from the Commission were installed at all Iraqi defense industry enterprises, and its inspectors regularly visited the facilities. After the next crisis surrounding Iraq in December 1998 and the expulsion of the UN Special Commission from the country, the United States devised another mechanism for monitoring Iraq's WMD programs, missiles, and defense industry in the form of a new structure, UNMOVIC (United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission), which essentially replicated the previous Commission and was granted the same unlimited powers through UN Security Council Resolution 1284 in December 1999. Meanwhile, Moscow did not exercise its veto right and abstained from voting.

Washington was not in a hurry to force Baghdad to comply with the UN resolution, as the sanctions continued to have a negative impact on the economy. However, as Iraq, supported by partners including Russia, intensified its efforts to break the blockade and came close to overcoming it, the U.S. used the alleged ties between Saddam Hussein's regime and the September 11, 2001 attacks as a justification to accelerate the imposition of UNMOVIC on Iraq. This was intended to reignite a strategy of provoking Iraq into conflicts, thereby creating the conditions for invoking Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which allows the use of force. Meanwhile, Baghdad continued to report to the UN on its implementation of disarmament and other Security Council demands, providing reports with detailed documentation.

This can be illustrated by the extensive report presented by the Iraqi delegation, headed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, during negotiations with UN Secretary-General K. Annan in New York on February 26-27, 2001. The 90-page report detailed everything that had been done to implement the Security Council resolutions on Iraq. However, it was ignored by the United States. This led to the subsequent adoption, at the American initiative, of UN Security Council Resolution 1441 in November 2002, which issued an ultimatum requiring the Iraqi authorities to comply with UN Security Council Resolution 1284. Russia could have used its veto power, especially since China and France (with Jacques Chirac as President of France) might have supported it, along with the non-permanent members of the Security Council, including Germany, Syria, and several other countries. However, Moscow abstained once again. The harsh wording of UN Security Council Resolution 1441 was

then interpreted by the United States as a mandate for war against Iraq and the overthrow of its legitimate government.

In fact, Iraq was given a final opportunity to fulfill its disarmament obligations according to the relevant Security Council resolutions, which, in turn, decided to introduce an enhanced inspection regime to ensure the complete and verifiable completion of the disarmament process outlined in Resolution 687 (1991) and subsequent Council resolutions. In this regard, the Council reminded Iraq that it had repeatedly warned the country that any further violations of its obligations would lead to serious consequences, which was presented by Washington as the right to use force.

When the author approached the Iraqi side in an attempt to persuade the leadership of the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) to reject the parliament's decision made the previous day to refuse UNMOVIC, he was met with refusal from Taha Yassin Ramadan, Tariq Aziz, and Foreign Minister Naji Sabri. However, on November 28, 2002, he was received by the director of the Iraqi Intelligence Service (IIS), Taher Habbush, who, after listening to Moscow's arguments, responded briefly: «That means there will be war».<sup>7</sup>

To further mislead the international community, at Washington's request, a UN Security Council meeting at the foreign minister level was convened on February 5, 2003. During this session, Colin Powell presented a vial containing what he claimed were anthrax spores, accusing Baghdad not only of hiding weapons of mass destruction (WMD) but also providing unsubstantiated evidence that Iraq was secretly producing large quantities of chemical and biological weapons using alleged mobile facilities that traveled across the country.

Secondly, American analytical experts concluded that overthrowing the ruling regime in Baghdad through military intervention at that time risked the breakup of Iraq into three parts: Kurdistan in the north, a Shiite south and a Sunni center. This would have meant that Turkey would deploy troops into the northern Kurdish provinces to prevent an uprising in its own southeastern Kurdish regions<sup>8</sup>, led by the radical Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which had already long been causing problems for the Turkish government with its terrorist activities. Moreover, Washington was unwilling to damage relations with Ankara, its key NATO ally in the region.

The Shiite south would have fallen under the influence of Khomeinist Iran, which sought to establish a «Shiite crescent» across the Middle East by inciting revolutions based on the radical ideology of Ayatollah Khomeini. This would have posed a direct threat to Israel and the pro-American regimes

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<sup>7</sup> Conversation of the author with the director of the Iraqi Intelligence Service, Taher Habbush, on November 28, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> The Kurds make up approximately one-third of Turkey's population (author's note).

of the Persian Gulf, with their vast oil and gas resources. The creation of a Sunni state would have meant the emergence of a new Islamist-nationalist entity—something that later materialized in the form of ISIS<sup>9</sup>). This was in no way aligned with the interests of the United States in the region.

Moreover, maintaining Saddam Hussein's regime as a military threat **allowed the U.S. to push Arabian monarchies into purchasing massive quantities of American weapons**—estimated by experts to exceed \$60 billion in the 1990s alone. At the same time, as Iraq's socio-economic situation sharply deteriorated due to sanctions, Washington sought to prevent uncontrolled collapse by adopting UN Security Council Resolution 986 in 1995 also known as "Oil-for-Food Programme. This resolution permitted Baghdad to export a limited amount of oil, using the proceeds to purchase food, medicine, and later various types of civilian equipment. Additionally, part of the funds was allocated for compensation payments to Kuwait and covering the costs of the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM).

This is why a ceasefire rather than a peace treaty was concluded with Iraq, **allowing the U.S. to maintain the sanctions regime and Baghdad's isolation even after the cessation of hostilities.** Moreover, the U.S. did not intervene when Iraqi forces suppressed the Shiite uprising in the south, despite the fact that U.S. and British air forces could have easily destroyed the Iraqi helicopters and tanks that entered Shiite cities south of the capital and brutally crushed the rebels.

Washington then spent 12 years applying sanctions pressure on Iraq to weaken its military completely and fuel public dissent. A new pretext—such as the events of September 11, 2001—was needed to swiftly and with minimal losses occupy the entire country while preserving its territorial integrity and installing a «puppet» government in Baghdad.

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<sup>9</sup> The organization is banned in the Russian Federation by the decision of the Supreme Court dated December 29, 2014.

### 3. Mechanisms of Pressure: Economy, Diplomacy, Military Policies

In 1991, a complete **financial and economic blockade** was imposed on Iraq. Oil exports were allowed only in very small quantities for the needs of refineries in Jordan. All of Iraq's financial assets were fully frozen, and any banking transactions were prohibited. The country was completely disconnected from SWIFT. Only humanitarian aid in the form of food and medical supplies could be imported, and that too only with the permission of the UN Security Council Sanctions Committee, which often blocked such shipments. This led to a dire situation—famine, lack of medical supplies for the civilian population, and a sharp devaluation of the currency by tens of times.

Iraq was characterized by the phenomenon of personal gain from deals within the framework of the UN humanitarian program and the involvement of foreign businesses and politicians, including Western ones, in corrupt schemes. This was done quite simply: the Iraqis would inflate the prices of oil export contracts and supply deals with various countries, and the buyer, after making payment, was expected to return the profit to the Iraqi side. This was done through cash transfers and various additional payments. After the American occupation of the country, a so-called independent commission was created, led by Senator Paul Volcker. The Volcker Commission concluded that Iraq had used its UN-granted right to arbitrarily distribute contracts for oil purchases and humanitarian aid supplies in order to influence global public opinion. Typically, Iraq was most interested in countries that were members of the UN Security Council, as they might help lift the sanctions imposed on Iraq in the future.

Iraq refused oil supply contracts to countries it disliked and from which it expected nothing good. For example, some contracts initially granted to American companies quickly shifted to Russian companies. Additionally, Iraq supplied oil to private individuals and organizations it considered influential enough to «speak on its behalf» in their respective countries. Often, these individuals earned income from Iraqi oil through intermediaries who purchased oil from Iraq and resold it with a markup to large oil companies. Over time, Iraq realized that, in addition to financing its lobbying efforts among representatives of other countries, it could extract significant profits from the Oil-for-Food program. The independent committee investigating

this program discovered that, as a result of two years of various violations and manipulations, the Iraqi government secretly generated nearly two billion dollars in illicit revenue, part of which was deposited into accounts controlled by Iraq in Jordan and Lebanon, while some was kept in Iraq's diplomatic missions worldwide.<sup>10</sup>

Among the French figures mentioned in the Volcker report on Iraq's illegal financial activities<sup>11</sup> were the names of the former French Permanent Representative to the UN, Special Advisor to the UN Secretary-General Jean-Bernard Mérimée, and former Minister of the Interior Charles Pasqua<sup>12</sup>. Russia, whose companies, political parties, organizations, and individual public and political figures were also mentioned in the report, denied the accusations, discovering forged signatures on several documents referenced in the report.

In **political and diplomatic terms**, Iraq was almost completely isolated, as all Western countries, with the exception of Eastern European states, and their allies severed diplomatic relations with Baghdad. Membership in many regional organizations was frozen, and Iraqi representatives were subject to a boycott.

In **military and military-industrial terms**, the Iraqi army suffered heavy losses in personnel and equipment. The United States did not fulfill their promise made to Gorbachev and Shevardnadze, which was conveyed to Saddam Hussein through Evgeny Primakov, that they would not strike Iraqi forces if they began to withdraw from Kuwait on January 17, 1991. It was at the moment of this withdrawal, when tanks were being loaded onto platforms and infantry units were on the march, that U.S. Air Force and Navy bombed them with bombs and missiles. Two of the best Republican Guard armored divisions, Mecca and Adnan Khairulla, along with hundreds of armored personnel carriers, infantry fighting vehicles, trucks, and more, were destroyed. Then, American aviation destroyed all 27 military airfields on Iraqi territory, along with airplanes and airfield equipment, as well as virtually all air defense systems.

◆ **Baghdad had previously made a mistake by purchasing air defense systems from the USSR, entrusting the construction of positions for them to Yugoslavia, and obtaining control keys from France. France and Yugoslavia transferred all the information to Washington.**<sup>13</sup>

10 Independent Inquiry Committee into the United Nations Oil-for-Food Programme : Report Manipulation of the Oil-for-Food Programme by the Iraqi Regime, October 27, 2005 – URL: <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/13894/ManipulationReport.pdf> (date of access: 03.02.2025).

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Author's note – this pertains to the question of trust in Paris and Belgrade.

After this, the Iraqi Air Force and Air Defense practically ceased to exist, and the American forces were able to calmly enter the southern regions of the country to finish off the already weakened parts of the Iraqi army. At the same time, air and missile strikes were carried out on military headquarters and command points, security service centers, including the headquarters of the intelligence service, as well as the military-industrial complex sites in Iraq, including those in Baghdad and other major cities of the country.

In 2003, during the American invasion of Iraq, the same tactics were used, with additional strikes on government and presidential facilities, as well as the headquarters of the ruling Ba'ath party, which led to the complete loss of control by the authorities over the situation in the military and the country as a whole. The Americans, bypassing the major cities, were able to cover 600 km from the border with Kuwait to Baghdad in 22 days and capture the city. Kurdish armed formations assisted them from the north. **In 2003, the CIA could communicate to the command of the Republican Guard (the elite of the Iraqi military), to whom Saddam Hussein had allowed to get in touch with the Americans regarding the terms of a ceasefire.** The United States paid 15 generals of the Republican Guard \$750 million to surrender the capital without a fight, which happened on April 6–8, 2003. The generals themselves were evacuated by American planes to Kuwait just before the U.S. forces entered the capital of Iraq.

In this regard, the conclusions of Russian military analyst V.P. Yurchenko are particularly interesting. He thoroughly examined the balance of power and resources of the parties at the beginning of the 2003 war and the tactics used by the armed forces of the USA and the UK against the Iraqi armed forces. He noted that the Anglo-Saxons avoided engaging in battles to capture large settlements, bypassing them and conducting airstrikes on concentrations of Iraqi troops and their headquarters, while also making full use of their technological superiority in weaponry.<sup>14</sup>

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14 V.P. Yurchenko. On Some Preliminary Results of Military Operations in Iraq // Iraq: First Results, Conclusions, Lessons / Institute for Israel and Middle Eastern Studies. – Moscow, 2003. – P. 51–77. – URL: [http://book.iimes.su/wp-content/uploads/2003/r2003irq\\_3.pdf](http://book.iimes.su/wp-content/uploads/2003/r2003irq_3.pdf) (date of accession: 01.02.2025)

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In the history of international relations, the application of a sanctions regime by the United States against Iraq marked a turning point, representing the first use of total sanctions as a tool of foreign policy. This precedent laid the foundation for the subsequent use of similar measures against other countries in order to weaken and replace undesirable regimes.

The main goal of this strategy was to significantly weaken Iraq's economic potential, as its rapid development posed a threat to American hegemony in the region. The United States sought to demonstrate its ability to completely undermine the economy of any regional competitor if necessary.

Special attention was given to neutralizing Iraq's military power as a leading regional power in the Middle East. In particular, a priority task was the destruction of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction potential to prevent possible threats to Israel and pro-American monarchies in the Persian Gulf.

The sanctions regime also aimed to destabilize the internal political situation in the country. As the sanctions were negatively affecting the socio-economic situation, they created conditions for increased internal tension and the escalation of interethnic and interfaith conflicts between Arabs and Kurds, Sunnis and Shiites. The ultimate goal of this strategy was to replace the nationally oriented ruling elite with a pro-Western regime that shared the ideological and spiritual values of the Western world. To achieve this goal, external opposition forces were actively used, and rising dissent among the military and civilian population were encouraged.



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Cooperation**

The Primakov Center is an expert and analytical platform established in memory of an outstanding diplomat Evgeny Primakov in 2015.

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