Halliday and Joe Stork argue that the question of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and, by extension, its regional consequences. The question that always has to be asked is how this affects the interests of the people in the Middle East as a whole. By that I don't just mean the peoples of the Arab world, but also Israel, Turkey and Iran, as well as those without countries who are involved, particularly the Kurds.

After two decades of everybody saying that Arab unity in the political sense had finished, that it had died with Nasser in 1970, that the Arab world would not unite, you now see a very strong unification current in the Arab world. You now have an apparent revival of the slogans of secular nationalism and Arab unity at a time when people were not expecting it. In that sense the Iraqi regime is the inheritor of policies and slogans that go back to the heyday of Arab nationalism in the 50s and 60s and, of course, added to that is the slogan of anti-imperialism, confrontation with the United States, with Britain and, at the same time, with Israel.

But the political character of the Iraqi mood is very different to that of Arab nationalism in the 50s and 60s. The Iraqi regime is a fascist regime in two senses. First, it is racist. Baathist ideology is a mythical, mystical and bombastic evocation of the greatness of the Arabs, as represented in the swaggering style of the regime, but also in the racist attitudes it adopts to non-Arabs, to Kurds, to Persians, to Jews and by extension towards the rest of the world. One can even see this racism in the way the Iraqi occupation forces have treated the different peoples in Kuwait. They have treated the Arabs reasonably well, they've treated the Westerners not that badly, but Filipinos, Bengalis and so on have been treated appallingly, raped, beaten up, killed, herded into the desert.

It's also fascist in the kind of terror which it carries out within Iraq: the killing of tens of thousands of people, the systematic torture of opponents, the reign of terror which has characterised this regime since 1968. I would compare the political record of the Baathist regime with that of Israel.

The Israeli regime has rightly been condemned for its policy towards the Palestinians. It has denied them their rights as a Palestinian nation, it has brutally suppressed the democratic rights of the Palestinians, and it has occupied the land of others. But if you compare the toll of human misery visited by the Iraqi regime on its own people, and now by extension on others, frankly there is little to choose between them. The Palestinians living under Israeli rule have more political rights, and are treated less brutally, than the Kurds living under Iraqi rule.

If you add up all the casualties of the Arab-Israeli wars, including those in Lebanon, in the last 40 years, you will find that they certainly don't reach the level of destruction wrought by Iraq in its war with Iran. This is not a popular comparison to make, but it is an important one for setting this regime in some context.

Stork: An issue here is what I would call the class question: the use of resources, the exclusive appropriation of wealth by these small ruling families. Saddam is seen as an alternative to that in part of the Arab world. This is a misperception in many ways. The misuse and greed of the Sabah family in Kuwait, astounding as it may be, and they are far from the worst offenders among the princely families in the Gulf, has to be set against the tremendous misuse of resources by Saddam's Iraq. We're talking about a country that was responsible for 17 or 18% of the total arms imports in the Third World in the decade of the 1980s. It was not a case of a poor country invading a rich country, it's a case of a rich country invading a rich country.

Halliday: There's no doubt that Saddam's policies prior to 2 August, confronting the West and Israel, and even more so since, have aroused a great current of sympathy in much of the Arab world. And the longer this crisis goes on the more this sympathy will grow, including in countries that are officially allied against him — Saudi Arabia, Syria, Egypt and others. This is most evident among the Palestinians.

Now why people should sympathise with Saddam, including people who are well aware of his human rights record, is fairly evident. It is a protest solidarity. Here is somebody who is standing up for the Arab world, who is at last doing something. But if one stands back and asks: "Does Saddam Hussein's Iraq, both before and after his invasion of Kuwait, advance the interests of the peoples of the Middle East as a whole?" The answer must be "no".

Let's take two simple issues: overcoming the colonial legacy and the Palestinian question. If you are going to say that Kuwait is a colonial entity, then so is Iraq. On the logic Saddam has used to justify the occupation of Kuwait, that this entity was set up by colonialism, Iraq should also be abolished as a state, as was originally the plan after the First World War, on a democratic basis. There should be an independent Kurdish state; there should be separate states for other parts of the Arab population if they so wish. So you cannot solve the colonial legacy by arbitrarily changing frontiers. This is simply a red herring.

Secondly, Palestine. Saddam proclaims himself to be a supporter of the Palestinians. Most Palestinians seem to believe this. What
validity is there for this? Look at Saddam's past record. The role of Saddam has been a manipulatory one. It is he who assassinated Palestinian leaders who wanted some kind of compromise with Israel. He has never taken the decisive step of saying that he is prepared to recognise a Palestinian state and an Israeli state - without which there can be no solution to the Palestinian question. One has to say that Saddam's record prior to 2 August has objectively served the interests of entrenched forces in Israel. Saddam Hussein does not want to see an independent Palestinian state.

Stork: We should try and address what seems to be the main issue here: what should be the response of progressive forces in the West to this invasion? I have come down on the position of neither imperialism nor fascism. However much we would like to see Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi regime vanish from the face of the earth, the question has to be asked: at what price?

The threat that Saddam represents, he's represented for a long time. It's not something that began on 2 August. He made a move on 2 August that set up all sorts of opportunities to reshape the political map in the region. But the United States should not be allowed to shape it alone. I think the issue is: do we support American military intervention in this instance? It was obviously not done in the name of democracy or human rights or any kind of anti-fascist crusade. It was done to preserve a friendly hegemony in the region; if not an American hegemony, then a hegemony of friendly forces, such as the Saudi regime.

Halliday: A lot of people outside the Middle East have opposed the American policy for general political reasons that are relevant, but may lead to mistaken conclusions.

One is a general hostility to war - and there's a mobilisation of peace sentiment around that. The fact is there is already war. Iraq has invaded Kuwait. And unless you adopt a thoroughgoing pacifist position, the normal, justified, response to aggression is to try to resist, to try to turn it back. That doesn't mean that all forms of response are justified. But the possibility of a military response to a war that has already started by what is, in effect, a fascist state seems to me to be something that has been too quickly excluded by many in the peace movement.

Secondly, there are people who say we should not oppose Saddam because the Palestinians and other oppressed peoples in the Middle East support him. This, of course, goes to the heart of the nature of solidarity. Is solidarity about the uncritical support of whatever oppressed peoples say, or is it an attempt to distinguish between whatever oppressed peoples may say at a particular time and what, in the view of any outside observer, are the long-term interests of that oppressed people? And my argument would be that the long-term interests of the Palestinians, for an independent and democratic Palestine side by side with an Israeli state, do not lie in siding with Saddam, whatever they may now think.

This brings us to the question of what attitude to adopt to Western military activity in the Gulf. The premise of much of the discussion seems to be that whatever Western powers do must be wrong. If this means that whatever they do is self-interested, this is clearly the case. The United States has gone into the Gulf to protect its strategic interests and protect oil. But this is not the same thing as saying that whatever they do in the Gulf is to be opposed. There are plenty of cases where the actions of such states, however self-interested, may have positive consequences. The role of Britain and the United States in fighting the fascist powers in the Second World War is an obvious case.

And this brings us to the question of who does it, and at this point critics of Western policy tend to get rather vague. They say there should be an Arab solution. Well, frankly an Arab solution means no solution. An Arab solution means the Iraqis stay in Kuwait; we all know the Arab world is completely divided and inefficient. Then it is said that, somehow, a United Nations force should operate. Fine, that would be quite appropriate. But this will involve, among others, Western armies. So I would hope very much that there could be a peaceful solution to this question, but I do not object to the role of Western armies in this, in the pursuit of what are legitimate international goals.

I regard them as legitimate for two reasons. First, in my view the defeat of the Iraqi regime is in the interests of the peoples of the Middle East as a whole, including the peoples of Iraq. Secondly, if you do not stop the takeover of weaker states by stronger states, there's going to be more cases of this. The Arab states cannot live in a moral and political universe of their own without reference to the rest of the world. And to allow Saddam to get away with this would mean that this example went all round the world.

Stork: Whatever happens, I think it is vital to avoid a shooting war.

Halliday: It may well be that sanctions will persuade Saddam to withdraw. I think Saddam could withdraw from Kuwait. It comes down to a judgment of his, which we can't predict. But the question still has to be posed: if he doesn't, then what happens, and who does it? And I repeat, I don't think the region can come up with a solution, any more than it has come up with a solution on Lebanon or the Palestinian question, or the Sudan or Morocco. And at that point you have to say, which do you prefer: Saddam sits in Kuwait and becomes the undisputed dominant force in the region, or somebody does something about it, even if it's the West? I would favour the West doing something about it.

Stork: Even if Saddam does sit in Kuwait, I'm not entirely clear who would be the dominant force in the region. What you will see - almost whether or not he withdraws - is a new coalition against him. It will most likely not leave him in Kuwait, but it could. It would be a terrible thing, but to tell you the truth I'm not sure how I would come down on that eventuality, because I'm not sure that the cure's better than the disease.

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