

Arms Race Caused the Gulf War

The tragic war between Saddam Hussein and George Bush became an occasion for dazzling poor people all over the Third World with a vast array of expensive technological weapons that devastate with impunity and precision. The intrinsic perversity of war was compounded, in this instance, by its great expense. The fact that it was at all fought -- a war between a small nation and a coalition of the most powerful states -- tells us much about the political distortions invited by two decades of relentless arms sales by merchants from the advanced industrial countries.

Over the last two decades, arms sales to Third World regimes grew at a dizzying rate -- in spite of the recurrence of high incidence of poverty in precisely those states involved in massive arms purchases. Large arms stockpiles in the industrial countries coupled with detente between the superpowers pushed arms merchants to the Third World. Semi-industrialized countries such as Brazil competed with the traditional arms suppliers by producing low-tech, lower cost weaponry modeled after the more expensive ones produced by large arms industries in the advanced societies. Despots obsessed both with maintaining and extending their powers rechanneled state funds towards arms acquisitions.

Iraq was a particularly disastrous case. With oil money to squander and a despot with ambitions for regional hegemony, the nation built up a million-man army and equipped it with as much sophisticated armament that the Saddam Hussein regime could get its hands on. The Saddam Hussein regime went beyond merely procuring arms. It tried to develop its own industrial base for producing highly destructive weaponry. At the instance of this regime, Iraq acquired the capability to extend the range of Soviet-supplied missiles to enable them to hit Israel. The Geneva Convention notwithstanding, Baghdad began producing poison gas and dabbled with bacteriological warfare techniques. Experts believe that Iraq was only a few years from developing nuclear

capability when she began her disastrous expansionist adventure.

With small nations everywhere acquiring new military technologies, the United States during the Reagan administration put in large sums to invest in an even more advanced generation of weapons. Within the framework of the so-called Strategic Defense Initiative, the US developed smart bombs and planes equipped with electronic jamming devices. Microchips and satellites were put at the service of war. This new generation of high-tech war gadgetry was put to test in the Gulf War -- with impressive and murderous results.

The close of the Cold War eased tensions between the two superpowers -- or, more precisely, knocked one superpower out of the arms race. But it did little to halt the arms spiral that infected junior partners and medium powers all over the world. As the global framework of bipolarity eroded, tensions began to rise between well-armed regional powers freed from the constraints of superpower rivalry.

In the Middle East, the retreat of Cold War politics reflected in the rise of Iran and Iraq as "free agents," governed only by the orthodoxies of their respective regimes and constrained only by the limits of their own firepower. The 8-year war between Iran and Iraq did not result in any gain on either end in spite of the nearly 1 million lives lost. But it did demonstrate how the new technologies of war, coupled with sufficient barbarity, can make violence between nations ultimately pointless. During that war, Iraq rained Scud missiles on the civilian population of Tehran and used poison gas against its own Kurdish people. Lacking in the industrial base to reproduce the weapons it expended, Iran threw hundreds of thousands of its highly motivated but primitively equipped troops against Iraqi armor and artillery. This war gave us images of terrible things to come.

In spite of the propensity for warmongering exhibited by the Saddam Hussein regime, France and the Soviet Union continued to sell weapons to it. German firms cooperated in the transfer of technologies that ultimately benefited the Iraqi military establishment. The United States mounted an aid program that involved the transfer of vehicles eventually used for war purposes.

The road to a destructive war was paved by arms merchants and governments that continued used weapons sales as instruments of the diplomatic game. Wars such as the one just fought -- and which everyone lost -- shall continue to disturb humanity until disarmament becomes a truly powerful popular campaign.

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