

# Putin's war in Ukraine: In Saddam Hussein's footsteps

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**There is a striking parallel between Vladimir Putin's behaviour in Ukraine and Saddam Hussein's behaviour in the past. The two men resorted to force, accompanied by remarkably similar claims, to achieve expansionist ambitions, writes Gilbert Achcar.**

There is a striking parallel between [Vladimir Putin](#)'s invasion of Ukraine — as in Georgia in 2008 and Crimea in 2014 — and [Saddam Hussein](#)'s actions towards Iran in the wake of its 1979 revolution, and Kuwait in 1990. The two men resorted to force, accompanied by remarkably similar claims, in order to achieve expansionist ambitions.

Saddam Hussein invaded Iran's territory in the autumn of 1980, claiming he was seeking to rescue the Arabic-speaking residents of the province of Khuzestan after he had encouraged them to rebel against Tehran's rule and declare an independent republic of 'Arabistan'. That invasion was the beginning of an eight-year war, the first effect of which was to allow the new Iranian regime to end the chaos that followed the revolution against the Shah's rule and consolidate its ranks.

With casualties on both sides estimated at one million, as well as widespread devastation and destruction, the two countries were back at square one at the end of the war.

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Ten years later, Saddam Hussein repeated his reckless behaviour, invading Kuwait while arguing that it was an Iraqi province carved out by the British, thus renewing an old claim that had led to military tension between the government of Abd al-Karim Qasim and British Protectorate authorities in Kuwait when they decided to grant the latter 'independence' in 1961.

Saddam's second invasion gave an opportunity to the United States to deploy its forces in the Gulf region on an unprecedented scale. The United States also bombed Iraq “back into the stone age” — as then-Secretary of State James Baker III is reported to have threatened then-Iraqi foreign minister Tariq Aziz of doing shortly before the war; and most importantly, it spectacularly asserted its supremacy as the only remaining superpower in a world that had entered a unipolar moment after decades of bipolarity.

Whether Khuzestan's Arabs have a right to self-determination and independence or not, and whether Iraq's claims on Kuwait are legitimate or not, is not the question here. Saddam Hussein's reckless adventurism manifested itself in his miscalculation of the balance of power in both cases.

Iraq thus emerged from the two wars devastated and extremely weakened, while Iraq's dictator only succeeded in strengthening his Iranian and US opponents. He had believed that the chaos that prevailed in Iran in 1980 would just worsen because of the Iraqi invasion, just as he thought in 1990 that the United States, which had been militarily paralysed since its exit from Vietnam, would not dare to confront him.

## **Saddam Hussein and Vladimir Putin**

The master of the Kremlin does not hide his nostalgia for the empire of the Russian tsars, repeatedly blaming the Bolsheviks for having applied the principle of self-determination in drawing the map of the Soviet Republics.

He is particularly and, from a Russian perspective, [understandably keen](#) on stopping NATO's further enlargement to republics that thirty years ago were part of the USSR and hence subject to Russian tutelage. In 2008, to prevent Georgia from joining NATO, Putin (then running the show from the prime minister's desk behind Dmitry Medvedev) justified the invasion of its territory citing his support for the secession of the provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which he encouraged to claim independence, as Saddam Hussein had done with 'Arabistan'.

In 2014, to prevent Ukraine from joining NATO, Putin invoked his desire to repair what he regarded as a mistake made by the rulers of the Soviet Union when he invaded Crimea and formally annexed it to Russia — as Saddam Hussein had dreamt of doing with Kuwait.

Putin also intervened militarily in that same year in the provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk in eastern Ukraine after again encouraging local separatists to declare independence. In the Georgian and Ukrainian cases, Putin estimated that the United States was too weak to confront him: in 2008 it was increasingly mired in the Iraqi quagmire, and in 2014, having withdrawn from Iraq after abysmal failure, it was experiencing a partial renewal of the military paralysis that afflicted it following the Vietnam war.

The circumstances in 2008 and 2014 and thereafter seemed to validate Putin's judgement. Relations within NATO hit rock bottom when Donald Trump won the US presidency in 2016, making Washington's traditional allies lose faith in the reliability of the US security umbrella. And those who wished that Joe Biden would erase Trump's legacy were quickly disappointed.

Indeed, after its disgraceful [retreat from Afghanistan](#) as the Taliban advanced, US credibility reached its lowest point since its defeat in Vietnam. Putin must have considered that the situation has therefore become favourable for a further step.

Putin escalated his pressure on Ukraine, against the backdrop of renewed clashes between the separatists and Ukrainian government forces, and the involvement of NATO member Turkey in delivering drones to Kyiv. If we add to this the global supply chain crisis that has led to a steep rise in oil and gas prices, the Russian state's main sources of revenue, the picture of appropriate opportunity is complete.

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Does this mean that Vladimir Putin’s calculations are more rational than Saddam Hussein’s, regardless of the similarities between their military adventures? Or is he giving Russia’s adversaries exactly what they want?

To be sure, Joe Biden will welcome the opportunity to repair his image, and so will Boris Johnson: after their [self-fulfilling prophecies](#), both men must be happy that Putin is helping them distract attention away from their failures.

The transatlantic alliance is also now revitalized (remember Emmanuel Macron’s [comment on “brain-dead” NATO](#) some two and half years ago?). Putin’s behaviour may have even motivated Russia’s neighbours, Finland and Sweden, to join [NATO](#), after more than seventy years of neutrality.

What is even more dangerous for Russia, however, is that it will face considerably increased Western economic pressure, which will certainly weaken it much more than Putin and his entourage seem to believe. In fact, Russia is engaging in a typical instance of “[imperial overstretch](#)” to recall [Paul Kennedy](#)’s phrase. It is acting militarily far beyond its economic capacity, with a GDP that is less than that of Canada, and even less than that of South Korea, equal to little more than seven per cent of the US’s GDP.

Putin’s calculations have proven to be correct, but only so far: For he has now taken with his recent actions a more adventurous risk than ever before.

**Gilbert Achcar**

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**P.S.**

• The New Arab. 24 Feb, 2022:  
<https://english.alaraby.co.uk/opinion/putins-war-ukraine-saddam-husseins-footsteps>

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