



# SELLING TO SADDAM

## Iraq & the BAe P.110/Tornado package, 1981-82

PROFESSOR KEITH HAYWARD FRAeS delves deep into a classic example of "Secret Whitehall" to reveal the political manoeuvrings behind British Aerospace's potentially controversial sale of a private-venture state-of-the-art jet fighter to Iraq in the early 1980s — just a few years before RAF Tornados were dropping bombs on Baghdad



**I**N 1996 LORD Justice Scott delivered his report about the sale of defence equipment and dual-use technology to Iraq during the latter's savage war with Iran between September 1980 and August 1988. Scott revealed that while "no lethal weapons" had been supplied to Iraq, the UK government had condoned or failed adequately to monitor actions by British companies. Although official policy was to remain neutral in the Iran-Iraq war, at stake was a multi-billion-pound market for defence equipment in Iraq and the wider Arab world. Unsurprisingly, "the British government felt that competitor nations with [even] fewer scruples would steal a march on British exporters".<sup>1</sup>

From 1981 this was especially true for British Aerospace (BAe) and the UK government, both of which were considering arms deals with Iraq worth more than £2bn, including the sale of BAe Hawks, Nimrod AEWs and Panavia Tornados, as well as the joint development of BAe Warton's proposed P.110 agile fighter project. The idea of selling to Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was felt at the time to be somewhat awkward; fortunately, an even more lucrative deal with Saudi Arabia and the emergence of less problematic European fighter options allowed the Iraqi deal to fade into

history. But the story of the putative relationship with Iraq is a classic example of "Secret Whitehall" at work, and underlines the political and ethical dilemmas arising when selling lethal equipment to a volatile and brutal regime.

### Launching the P.110

By the early 1980s BAe was facing difficult times; Panavia Tornado (for which BAe was the UK partner) and Hawk production was under way, but the Tornado had yet to sell outside the Panavia group of nations — Italy, Germany and the UK. More importantly, BAe's major combat-aircraft design team at Warton had little new business in hand. BAe Kingston was working as a junior partner with the Americans on the AV-8B Harrier II, but there was no follow-on to the Tornado. The RAF had drafted Staff Targets for a new combat aircraft to replace the Sepecat Jaguar and McDonnell Douglas Phantom, but financial constraints blocked progress. There were tentative attempts to build another European consortium, but these had faded by 1981, and that year's defence review confirmed there would be "no immediate replacement for the Jaguar".<sup>2</sup>

BAe's response was the private-venture P.110, aimed at a draft RAF requirement for an agile

OPPOSITE PAGE Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the early 1980s. ABOVE A concept model of the P.110, designed as a private venture by British Aerospace under the aegis of Executive Director, New Aircraft, Roy Boot during the early months of 1981. NORTH WEST HERITAGE GROUP VIA TONY BUTTLER