

November 23, 1990

SADDAM HUSSEIN AND THE CRISIS IN THE PERSIAN GULF

INTRODUCTION

The outcome of the crisis in the Persian Gulf will be decided to a large extent by the decisions of one man – Saddam Hussein. The ruthless Iraqi dictator precipitated the crisis by ordering the August 2 invasion of Kuwait. He has brought the United States to the brink of war by holding thousands of hostages in Iraq and Kuwait and refusing to heed United Nations resolutions calling on Iraq to withdraw unconditionally from Kuwait. Saddam, more than any other leader, has the power to determine whether the crisis will be resolved through diplomacy or through war.

Given Saddam's repeated ability to surprise his neighbors and the U.S. with sudden shifts in policy, it is difficult to predict his future actions. Yet a study of his past, his character, his policies, and his long-term goals sheds light on what he might do next.

Saddam is a born survivor. He escaped poverty through a street gang, became an assassin, organized the death squads in the late 1960s that propped up a narrowly based regime and used his control of the secret police to consolidate his personal power. Once installed as Iraq's supreme leader in 1979, Saddam brought to Iraq's foreign policy the tactics that served him in good stead throughout his political career: intimidation, conspiracy, terrorism, and the use of force.

Adept in Intimidation. Saddam, say those who long have observed him, is a ruthless opportunist with a predatory personality. He is quick to grab for what he wants and slow to relinquish it in the face of strong opposition. Adept in the art of intimidation, Saddam himself is not easily intimidated. Economic sanctions alone, therefore, are not likely to compel him to withdraw Iraqi troops from Kuwait be-

cause such an ignominious withdrawal would jeopardize his political leadership and personal survival.

Rejecting Face-Saving Solution. Only the credible threat or actual use of force will compel Saddam to relinquish Kuwait. Once he is convinced that war is imminent, Saddam probably will try to head it off and keep the U.S. off-balance by proposing a partial Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait, which would split the anti-Iraq coalition and give him a face-saving escape route from his own adventurism. As such, Washington must reject such a Munich-like diplomatic “solution” because it would enable Saddam to reap the fruit of his aggression and increase his destabilizing influence in the Middle East. Allowing Saddam to score a diplomatic victory in Kuwait will make it more difficult and more costly to halt Iraqi aggression in the future, when Iraq has developed more lethal weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons.

The U.S. therefore must press for a United Nations Security Council resolution calling for the use of force against Iraq unless Iraqi troops immediately and unconditionally withdraw from Kuwait. The longer the stalemate continues, the more time Saddam Hussein has to undermine the solidarity of the anti-Iraq coalition and find support for a face-saving settlement that will leave him free to launch future aggressions.

SADDAM'S EARLY LIFE

Saddam Hussein was born on April 28, 1937, to a landless peasant family near the town of Tikrit, 100 miles north of Baghdad on the Tigris River. Many details of his early life remain murky because of conflicting biographical accounts. Saddam (whose name translates as “one who confronts”) grew up without a father, either because his father died before his birth (the official story) or because he abandoned his family (according to a personal secretary who later broke with Saddam). After Saddam’s strong-willed mother, Subha, remarried, the young Saddam was constantly abused by a scornful stepfather, Ibrahim Hassan, a crude peasant who complained of Saddam: “He is a son of a dog [a particularly virulent insult in Arabic]. I don’t want him.”¹ Saddam did not begin his formal education until age ten because his stepfather preferred him to take care of the sheep.

In 1947 Saddam was sent to live with his mother’s brother, Khayrallah Tulfah, in a working-class neighborhood of Baghdad, the Iraqi capital, where many Tikritis lived. Khayrallah was an ardent Iraqi nationalist who was cashiered from the Iraqi army for joining an abortive anti-British and pro-Nazi uprising in 1941. Khayrallah was probably the strongest influence on Saddam’s early political views, infusing him with a hatred of British colonialism and the British-installed Hashemite regime that ruled Iraq after independence from Britain in 1932. Per-

1 Judith Miller and Laurie Mylroie, *Saddam Hussein and the Crisis in the Gulf* (New York: Random House, 1990), p. 27.

haps trying to emulate Khayrallah, Saddam applied to enter the Baghdad Military Academy, but failed the entrance examination. Although he never served in the army, Saddam developed a love of military uniforms and guns. Years later, after gaining power, he named himself a "Field Marshal."

Street Muscle. Saddam left school at age sixteen and became the leader of a street gang of poor Tikritis living in Baghdad. He killed his first man at the age of sixteen, by some accounts; others claim he may have been only twelve. In 1956, Saddam, then age nineteen, like most of the Arab world, was electrified by Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser's ability to transform a military defeat at the hands of Israel, France, and Britain into a political triumph in the Suez crisis. Saddam was inspired by Nasser's efforts to unify the Arab world. In 1957, Saddam joined the radical Baath (Renaissance) Party, which was dedicated to restoring Arab glory through pan-Arab unity, secular nationalism, and socialism. Saddam's gang gave the Baath Party street muscle. Saddam's political career was propelled by his ability to orchestrate and execute political violence.

The tiny Baath Party was relegated to the political sidelines when General Abdul Karim Qassim overthrew Iraqi King Faisal II in 1958. Saddam's first political murder is believed to have been the killing of a communist supporter of Qassim, who also happened to be Saddam's brother-in-law.² Saddam boldly led an abortive assassination attempt on General Qassim on October 7, 1959. Saddam, then 22, was wounded in the leg, and dug the bullet out with his pocket knife, according to an official account. Saddam then fled to Syria and ended up in Cairo where he spent four years on the Egyptian payroll being groomed by the Nasser regime as a future leader of the pan-Arab cause.³ While in Cairo, Saddam married his uncle Khayrallah's daughter, Sajida, and finally finished high school at the age of 24. In the meantime, he was arrested twice by Egyptian police, once for threatening to kill a fellow Iraqi student because of political differences and once for chasing another student through the streets of Cairo with a knife.⁴

SADDAM RISES THROUGH THE SECRET POLICE

Saddam returned to Iraq after the Baath Party overthrew General Qassim in February 1963 and joined the internal security forces. He became an interrogator and torturer in the *Qasr-al Nihayyah* ("Palace of the End"), a Baathist torture chamber in the palace where King Faisal and his family were executed in 1958.⁵ The Baath Party, weakened by factional cleavages, was ousted on November 18, 1963, by the Iraqi army. Saddam was arrested in October 1964 and jailed for almost two years. He concluded that the Baath Party henceforth should maintain

2 Saddam reportedly was incited to do this by his uncle Khayrallah. Miller and Mylroie, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

3 Yossef Bodansky and Vaughn Forrest, "Saddam Hussein," House Republican Research Committee, Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare, October 3, 1990, p. 4

4 Miller and Mylroie, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

5 Miller and Mylroie, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

strict unity and distrust ambitious army officers who had a tendency to purge non-military conspirators after a successful coup.

Torture and Terror. Saddam escaped from jail in 1966. He then founded the Baath internal security forces, the *Jihaz Haneen* (“instrument of yearning”). This dreaded organization assassinated the party’s enemies, monitored the loyalty of party members, and purged dissenters. The Baath Party returned to power in a coup in July 1968, in which Saddam’s security forces quickly purged non-Baathist army officers. Saddam’s cousin, General Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr, became President, but Saddam quickly became the strongman of the regime. As head of the internal security apparatus, Saddam crafted the Arab world’s most ruthless police state. His secret police routinely tortured political dissenters – even children, to extract confessions and information from their parents.⁶

Saddam’s political power base has always been the internal security services which he staffed with members of his own family and clan or neighbors from his home town, Tikrit. This “Tikriti mafia” became the core of Saddam’s regime as he continuously purged rivals and potential rivals from the Baath Party. So many high-ranking members of the regime hailed from Tikrit that Saddam banned the public use of the *laqab*, or surname indicating place of origin, to obscure the disproportionate number of “al-Tikritis” (people from Tikrit) in his inner circle.

Saddam ousted his cousin, Al-Bakr, from the presidency on July 16, 1979, and ruthlessly consolidated total control over Iraq. Claiming that he had uncovered a plot by pro-Syrian Baathists, Saddam purged up to 500 party members. At a meeting of hundreds of party cadres, Saddam read the names of 22 high-ranking party members, who then were led off to be executed. Several senior officials were shot shortly thereafter by a firing squad composed of Saddam and his surviving colleagues.

Ruthless Purges. Saddam himself is said to have killed 22 men.⁷ He personally executed his own Minister of Health, Riyadh Ibrahim, a longtime compatriot, in the middle of a Cabinet meeting in 1982 when the hapless minister suggested that Saddam temporarily step down from power to allow a negotiated solution to the Iran-Iraq war. Soon after, the minister’s dismembered body was delivered to his wife’s front door in a sack.⁸ Saddam’s use of terror, even against his own associates, inspires fear in Iraqis and has assured his domination of Iraqi politics.

Saddam may be understood best as a gang leader. He used his gang to gain control of the secret police, which he then used to gain control of the Baath Party, through which he rules Iraq. He now seeks to become the undisputed leader of

6 Amnesty International, “Iraqi Children Innocent Victims of Political Oppression,” April 1989.

7 David Pryce-Jones, “The Conquering Hero,” *The New Republic*, September 24, 1990, p. 19.

8 David Korn, “Blood Baath,” *The New Republic*, October 29, 1990, p. 13.

the Arab world. Fittingly, his favorite movie is said to be *The Godfather*, which he has seen many times.⁹

SADDAM'S PERSONALITY CULT

The Iraqi dictator sits at the center of a web of state, party, military, and secret police organizations. As President and Chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council, Saddam controls all government bureaucracies. As Secretary General of the Regional Command of the Baath Party, he leads 50,000 Baath Party members and 1.5 million sympathizers. As Commander in Chief of the armed forces he leads Iraq's one-million-man army. And through his powerful "Special Bureau," he keeps close tabs on Iraq's many competing intelligence and internal security agencies.

Giant portraits of Saddam dominate government offices and all public places. Iraq's state-controlled television periodically flashes Saddam's "eternal sayings" on the screen. His birthday is an Iraqi national holiday.

To strengthen his claim to leadership, Saddam has exploited symbols of Iraq's historical glory. He has encouraged comparisons to Nebuchadnezzar, the powerful leader of ancient Babylon, who conquered Jerusalem and brought the Jews to **Babylon**. He is reconstructing the walls of Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon, putting his own name on every tenth brick, as a testament to Iraq's pre-Islamic glory.¹⁰ He has invoked Saladin, the brilliant military and political leader who defeated the Crusaders and conquered Jerusalem in year 1187. Although Saladin also was born near Tikrit, Saddam neglects to recognize that Saladin was a Kurd, the ancestor of the 3 to 4 million mountain people in northeastern Iraq whom Saddam ruthlessly has repressed.

Demanding Deference. Saddam rules with what seems a messianic sense of mission. He seeks to restore the Arab world to what he believes is its rightful place in the world as a Third Superpower. He is quick to take offense at those who do not accord him the respect he feels is due. Since 1986, public insults of Saddam have been punishable by death. Even when dealing with foreigners, Saddam demands deference. According to an unnamed diplomat who has met with him, Saddam habitually holds his hand extremely low when greeting visitors to force them to bow as they shake hands.¹¹

Because he lacks personal charisma and is not an articulate speaker, he prefers to communicate to his countrymen through a surrogate, often a television announcer who bears a striking resemblance to Saddam, who reads Saddam's speeches. Saddam lives and works in isolation, shunning contact with his people,

9 Miller and Mylroie, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

10 Peter Mansfield, "The Arab Nation and Saddam Hussein," *Middle East International*, August 31, 1990, p. 26.

11 *Wall Street Journal*, September 12, 1990.

probably out of fear of assassination. He is believed to have survived several attempts on his life and is heavily guarded during his rare public appearances.

Saddam is extremely distrustful, even of his closest associates. When he goes on one of his infrequent foreign trips, he brings his own food, a food taster, and his own chair, apparently fearful of sitting on a poisonous needle. When the lights momentarily flickered out at the February 1990 Arab Cooperation Council summit, Saddam dove under a table, apparently fearing an assassination attempt.¹²

SADDAM'S GAMBLES

Saddam has not had the same success imposing his will on neighboring countries as he has had with Iraq. When revolutionary Iran, after Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's 1979 revolution, threatened Saddam's regime by stirring unrest among Iraqi Shiites, who make up about 55 percent of Iraq's 18 million people, Saddam responded by invading Iran in September 1980. Saddam, expecting a quick and easy victory, badly miscalculated the strength of Iranian resistance. Iraq became mired in a bloody eight-year war with Iran that took the lives of up to 500,000 Iraqis and left Iraq \$80 billion in debt. Although Saddam eventually won a military victory in 1988 by using illegal chemical weapons on the poorly prepared Iranians and Iran's Kurdish allies inside Iraq, he had little to show for his victory. The Iranians were forced to accept a ceasefire, but refused to negotiate a peace settlement.

Saddam was unable to provide war-weary Iraqis with a "peace dividend." High world oil prices in the early 1980s and generous loans from the Arab Gulf states, had enabled Saddam to coopt many Iraqis with a guns and butter policy that combined massive military spending with huge economic development projects. But the fall of oil prices after 1985 reduced Iraq's oil revenues and reduced the Iraqi dictator's ability to finance ambitious economic development schemes. Although Saddam's pervasive police apparatus precluded organized opposition, Iraqis are believed to have grown increasingly disenchanted with Saddam's harsh rule.

Blocking Coups. Particularly worrisome for Saddam was the growing restiveness of Iraqi army officers, who had seen at close range the terrible price that Iraqis had paid for Saddam's military miscalculations. Saddam surely realized that the biggest threat to his rule came from the army, which had staged thirteen coups d'etat between 1920 and 1979. To block possible coup attempts, Saddam constantly purged high-ranking officers and executed hundreds of officers suspected of disloyalty. Baath Party commissars monitored military affairs down

12 Miller and Mylroie, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

to the battalion level. Secret police were infiltrated into the ranks. And an elite Presidential Guard unit was recruited primarily of diehard loyalists from the Tikrit region. War heroes who threatened to become potential rivals of Saddam Hussein were forced out of public view or placed under house arrest. Even Minister of Defense Adnan Khayrallah, Saddam's cousin, brother-in-law and closest friend as a young boy, fell victim to Saddam's suspicions. Khayrallah, who directed Iraq's military effort in the final months of the war, died in a mysterious helicopter accident in May 1989 believed by many to have been arranged by the Iraqi dictator.¹³

Following the August 20 1988, ceasefire with Iran there were a growing number of reported coup attempts against Saddam. The Iraqi internal security forces sniffed out and foiled several plots, including an attempt to shoot down Saddam's plane and an attempt to bomb the presidential reviewing stand during a military parade.¹⁴ There have been four credible reports of coup attempts this year alone, including an abortive car bomb attack to be launched on January 6 during Iraq's "Army Day" celebrations.¹⁵ Saddam became so distrustful of his own military that he closed officers clubs this July and purged three top military leaders, including Iraq's most celebrated war hero, Lt. General Maher Abdul Rashid.¹⁶

Miscalculation in Kuwait. Saddam's August 2 invasion of Kuwait was more a mark of economic and political weakness than a sign of military strength. Saddam in effect tried to make the annexation of Kuwait Iraq's "peace dividend" from its war with Iran. By seizing Kuwait's oil wealth, Saddam tried to score a personal triumph that would discourage challenges to his rule, quiet grumbling about his fruitless war with Iran, and reverse growing resentment of his brutal dictatorship by exploiting Iraqi nationalism and irredentism. In addition to halting the erosion of his domestic power base, a successful annexation of Kuwait would strengthen Saddam's claim to the leadership of the Arab world. It would give him additional financial resources, in the form of Kuwait's 94 billion barrels of oil reserves and \$100 billion in foreign investments, to accelerate his ambitious military, nuclear, and development programs. Having conquered Kuwait, Saddam would loom large as the "new Nasser" — a strong leader who could stir the Arab masses by championing their long-held dreams for Arab unity and restoring Arab honor by standing up to Israel and the West.

Saddam once again grossly miscalculated the implications of aggression. Although Kuwait swiftly succumbed to his onslaught, Saudi Arabia, which he probably expected could be intimidated, uncharacteristically boldly chose to resist the expansion of Iraqi power. The Saudis staunchly backed Kuwait and invited

13 Adnan Khayrallah also sided with his sister, Saddam's wife, in a bitter family feud over Saddam's public affair with Samira Shahbandar, the ex-wife of the chairman of Iraqi Airways. Saddam's eldest son, Uday, avenged his mother's honor by publicly beating to death the presidential food taster, who had introduced Saddam to Shahbandar. Efraim Karsh, "In Baghdad, Politics is a Lethal Game," *The New York Times Magazine*, September 30, 1990, p. 40.

14 *The Guardian* (London), March 24, 1989, p. 14.

15 *Washington Post*, August 16, 1990, p. A34.

16 Laurie Mylroie, "Saddam Was in Desperate Trouble," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 10, 1990, p. A10.

American, British, French, Egyptian, Syrian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Moroccan troops (listed in descending order of the strength of committed military forces) to help defend Saudi territory. This unlikely coalition, supported diplomatically in the United Nations Security Council by the Soviet Union and Mainland China, imposed an economic embargo on Iraq on August 6, and threatens to use military force to compel Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait.

SADDAM'S STRATEGY

Since the August 2 invasion, Saddam cautiously has sought to consolidate Iraq's control over Kuwait while avoiding a provocation that could trigger a war with the multinational forces assembled in the Persian Gulf to curb Iraqi aggression. Saddam in early August ordered Iraqi ship captains to permit their ships to be boarded and searched by the blockading naval forces enforcing U.N. economic sanctions. Iraqi warplanes carefully avoid entering Saudi airspace or challenging American or Saudi air forces in the Persian Gulf.

Meanwhile, Iraq steadily consolidates its control over Kuwait. Baghdad declared on August 8 that Kuwait had been annexed as an Iraqi province. Iraqi troops began taking foreign hostages in Kuwait on August 13 to be used as shields to deter attacks on Iraqi strategic and economic targets. Iraqi troops have terrorized Kuwait's population, driving 500,000 of Kuwait's 750,000 native citizens out of the country.¹⁷

Thousands of Iraqi peasants and urban poor have been settled in Kuwait.¹⁸ Iraq has organized some of the 350,000 Palestinian refugees in Kuwait into a pro-Iraqi force, and has permitted radical pro-Iraqi Palestinian terrorist leaders such as Abu Nidal and Abu Abbas to set up headquarters in Kuwait City.

Saddam's strategy is to tighten his grip on Kuwait while buying time to sow disunity in the unwieldy anti-Iraq coalition. He probably reckons that the longer the stalemate drags on, the more likely is it that the U.N.-mandated embargo will spring leaks and the anti-Iraq coalition will crumble. By stringing out the crisis, Saddam apparently hopes to deflect attention from his own aggression to the Western military presence and strengthen political constraints in the U.S. and the West against military action by stressing the high costs of war. Meanwhile, Saddam tries to drive wedges into the anti-Iraq coalition by exploiting the Arab-Israeli dispute, selectively releasing hostages and offering free oil to countries that violate the U.N. economic embargo.

One Iraqi ploy is the attempt to link the Persian Gulf crisis with the Arab-Israeli conflict. By doing this Saddam hopes to focus Arab attention on the U.S.-Israeli axis to undermine the anti-Iraq coalition. Saddam offered on August 12 to

¹⁷ *The Economist*, October 20, 1990.

¹⁸ *Middle East International*, August 31, 1990, p. 8.

withdraw his troops from Kuwait if Israeli withdrew from occupied Arab territories and if Syria withdrew from Lebanon. Although the U.S., Israel, and most Arab states have rejected this linkage, the October 8 riots in Jerusalem that resulted in the deaths of seventeen Palestinians aided Iraq by diverting the attention of the Arab and Muslim countries. Saddam escalated his propaganda attacks on Israel on October 9 and announced that Iraq had developed a new missile, the *Hijara* ("the stone"), capable of hitting Israel, like the stones of the Palestinian rioters in Jerusalem. Saddam knows that nothing unites the Arab world like an anti-Israeli stand, so he attempts to thrust himself to the head of an anti-Israel crusade.

Appealing to Arab Masses. Saddam has appealed to the Arab masses over the heads of Arab rulers opposed to his invasion of Kuwait. Iraq set up a radio station on August 13 that calls on Egyptians to rise up against Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, who has taken a pro-Kuwaiti stand. Iraqi radio charges meanwhile that the U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia is a U.S.-Israeli plot to control oil, that Israeli personnel are in Saudi Arabia masquerading as Americans, that U.S. soldiers massacred pro-Iraqi Saudi demonstrators, and that U.S. soldiers have brought AIDS, alcohol, pork, and prostitutes to Saudi Arabia.¹⁹ Although Saddam is a secular socialist who brutally crushed Iraqi Muslim fundamentalist groups, he now poses as a defender of Islam against the infidel West. Saddam calls for liberation of the Holy Places in Mecca from occupation by "unbelievers and the Jews."²⁰ Although this charge appears specious in the West, the Saudis were nervous enough about the gullibility of Arabs to invite Muslim religious leaders to Mecca in September to certify that the Holy Places had not been violated.

At the forefront of Saddam's efforts to shatter the anti-Iraq coalition have been the Western hostages held in Kuwait and Iraq, now estimated at about 2,000, including some 900 Americans. Baghdad announced on August 17 that it was moving hundreds of hostages to strategic and economic facilities in Iraq to deter attack and to raise the domestic political pressures on the U.S. and other states to postpone military action. Iraq initially demanded a U.S. pledge not to attack as a precondition for releasing these hostages.

When this failed to bring U.S. concessions, Iraq began selectively to release hostages to lure foreign leaders to Baghdad and weaken the unity of the anti-Iraq coalition. The Iraqis believe that the subsequent procession of fawning foreign dignitaries to Baghdad, including former West German Chancellor Willy Brandt, former Japanese Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone, and former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark, gives Iraq the opportunity to put its case before the world and reduce the chances of an attack against Iraq. Saddam Hussein announced on last week that Iraq would free all remaining hostages in small groups beginning

19 *The New York Times*, September 16, 1990, p. 2.

20 *The Washington Post*, October 5, 1990, p. A30.

on December 25 and continuing to March 25, "unless something should occur to disturb the atmosphere of peace." Saddam's manipulation of the hostages is designed to paralyze the anti-Iraq coalition and preclude concerted military action against Iraq during the winter months, which are the most favorable months for military operations due to lower temperatures and reduced numbers of sandstorms.

SADDAM'S FUTURE POLICY

Saddam is trapped in a dilemma of his own making. He cannot bow to international pressure and withdraw unconditionally from Kuwait because this would be political suicide. It would shatter his carefully cultivated aura of invincibility, raise anew strong doubts about his judgment and leave him vulnerable to future coups by disgruntled army officers. Yet he cannot sit tight in Kuwait if that means war with the U.S., for such a war would be military suicide.

Saddam is unlikely to be pushed out of Kuwait solely by economic sanctions. Although the U.N. economic embargo is beginning to pinch, it will not develop a painful bite for several more months. Saddam can divert scarce food and other supplies to his army, while allowing Iraqi Kurds, Kuwaitis, and Iraq's 2,000 Western hostages to starve slowly for the benefit of Western television cameras.²¹ The international consensus in support of the embargo will dissipate when it becomes clear that Saddam is willing to starve more people to retain Kuwait than the U.N. is willing to starve to liberate Kuwait. Saddam took the Iraqi people hostage long ago.

Stalling for Time. Saddam has proved himself a tough-minded master of brinkmanship. He thus surely will cling to Kuwait until convinced that this will lead to a war that he cannot hope to win. Saddam apparently is not yet convinced that war is imminent. One of his closest associates, his son-in-law General Hussein Kamel, who is the Ministry of Industry and Military Production, recently told a diplomat: "We have nothing to worry about from a war with the U.S. The Americans are not prepared to pay the price of a war with Iraq."²² Iraqi officials believe that the U.S.-led coalition is a fragile marriage of convenience that will weaken and dissolve over time. They speak of a "French and Soviet axis" that eventually will end the "U.S.-imposed Gulf crisis."²³ Iraq will therefore continue stalling for time to wear down the resolve of the anti-Iraq coalition and drive wedges between its members.

21 See: James Phillips, "Can the Embargo on Iraq Succeed?" Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 789, September 5, 1990.

22 *The New York Times*, November 4, 1990, p. 2.

23 *The Wall Street Journal*, November 2, 1990, p. A10.

Surprising Flexibility. Yet Saddam has shown flexibility in the past when confronted with an unfavorable situation. For example, in March 1975 he struck a deal with Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi of Iran to accept Iran's territorial claims in a border dispute in exchange for an end to Iranian military aid to Iraq's Kurdish rebels. Later, Saddam withdrew his territorial claim on Iran's oil-rich Khuzestan province, called "Arabestan" by the Iraqis, in a vain bid to end the Iran-Iraq war in 1982, after Iran had halted Iraq's invasion and pushed Iraqi forces back to the border. Twelve days after invading Kuwait, Saddam demonstrated tremendous flexibility by suddenly bowing to Iran's terms for a peace treaty and withdrawing its troops from Iranian territory. This concession to Iran, Iraq's bitter historical enemy, must have been unpopular with the Iraqi people, a factor that is likely to make Saddam all the more determined to reject a humiliating forced withdrawal from Kuwait.

Saddam will abandon Kuwait only when convinced that holding on to it will trigger a disastrous war that threatens his regime's political and physical survival. Convincing Saddam of this is difficult for Washington, given its need to maintain a broad international consensus, particularly within the U.N. Security Council, for sustained economic and diplomatic pressure on Iraq. When U.S. Air Force Chief of Staff General Michael Dugan threatened this consensus by publicly threatening to "decapitate" Iraq's leadership, Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney sacked him on September 17. This action probably was perceived in Baghdad as a signal that the U.S. was not serious about its threatened use of force.

Saddam Hussein is a calculating risk-taker who surely now continually is gauging not only the capability, but also the willingness, of America to use force. He doubts American will power, not American firepower. According to an unnamed Arab ambassador in Baghdad, Saddam will not consider withdrawal unless he "sees the red eye" (the determination) of his opponent.²⁴ George Bush recently has shown Saddam this "red eye" by expressing anger over the plight of Kuwaitis and the estimated 900 American hostages held in Iraq and Kuwait. Moreover, the Bush administration has escalated the pressure on Iraq by announcing on November 8 the commitment of over 400,000 troops to the Persian Gulf by early next year. Washington also is preparing to push a resolution through the U.N. Security Council supporting the use of force if Iraq fails to withdraw from Kuwait.

Soviet moves may play a key role in determining Saddam's future policies. According to an unnamed Iraqi official close to Saddam, the Iraqi dictator believes that the Soviet reluctance to countenance a war over Kuwait is one of the strongest constraints on U.S. willingness to go to war. Saddam has given specific instructions that he is to be closely informed of every Soviet move.²⁵ Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's waffling on the question of military force, particularly his statement on October 29 indicating that military solution was unacceptable in

24 *The Wall Street Journal*, November 2, 1990, p. A10.

25 John Burns, "To Manipulate the World, Mystify It," *The New York Times*, November 4, 1990, p. 2.

the Persian Gulf crisis, can only have emboldened Saddam. But if Moscow should signal Saddam that it accepts the need for military force, perhaps in a U.N. Security Council Resolution supporting the use of force to enforce previous U.N. resolutions, then Saddam's calculus concerning Kuwait may suddenly change.

Fall-Back Position. Once he is convinced that a war is imminent, Saddam probably will seek to forestall military action with a timely diplomatic initiative. Baghdad already quietly has staked out a plausible fall-back position that could resolve Saddam's dilemma through a partial withdrawal from Kuwait. Significantly, when Kuwait was annexed as Iraq's nineteenth province on August 8, a swathe of northern Kuwait that the Iraqis named the *Saddamiyat al-Mitlaa*, was incorporated into Iraq's Basra province. According to maps distributed to Iraqi embassies, this territorial enclave consists of Kuwait's Northern Province, which contains approximately one-third of Kuwait's territory and one-fifth of its oil.²⁶ Refugees fleeing Kuwait report that border posts and a concrete wall are being constructed along the new border.²⁷ If Saddam concludes that he cannot hold Kuwait without a war, he may offer to withdraw to this new boundary, which essentially corresponds to the historic boundary of the Ottoman Turkish province of Basra. Baghdad may have been preparing Iraqis and other Arabs for such a partial withdrawal by leaking reports on October 18 that Saddam had a dream in which the Prophet Mohammed called on him to leave Kuwait.²⁸

Such a diplomatic settlement would allow Saddam to save face by leaving him in control of Kuwait's northern oil fields and the strategic islands of Warba and Bubiyan, which guard the access channels to Iraq's naval base at Umm Qasr. This should be absolutely unacceptable to the U.S. It would give Saddam a "war dividend" of up to 20 billion barrels of Kuwaiti oil reserves and improved access to the Persian Gulf. As dangerous, it would boost Saddam's prestige as a strong Arab leader that faced down the Western powers. This would enhance his influence and strengthen radical anti-Western forces throughout the Middle East.

Uncomfortable Saudis. Secretary of State James Baker repeatedly has ruled out "partial solutions" to the Persian Gulf crisis that would involve Kuwaiti concessions to Iraq in exchange for a partial withdrawal. But other members of the anti-Iraq coalition may not reject such an outcome, especially if the stalemate over Kuwait drags on without an end in sight. Saudi Arabia, in particular, is uncomfortable with the prospect of an open-ended presence of hundreds of thousands of American troops. While such a huge military force safeguards Saudi security in the short run, it undermines Saudi political stability in the long run because it undercuts the chief source of legitimacy of the ruling dynasty — the guardianship of Muslim holy places in Mecca and Medina. The Saudis privately have pressed Washington for a swift and decisive resolution of the crisis. They are

26 Oil Daily, *Energy Compass*, London, October 26, 1990, p. 3.

27 *Wall Street Journal*, November 2, 1990, p. A10.

28 See: Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Near East and South Asia Daily Report, October 23, 1990, p. 25.

believed to be concerned about the possibility of anti-Western protests during *Ramadan*, the Muslim month of fasting which begins in March 1991 and during the *Haj*, the Muslim pilgrimage, which begins in June.

If the Saudis conclude that Washington is incapable of decisive military action and that Saddam will survive this crisis, then they increasingly will be tempted to strike a deal with Iraq. Saddam knows this and continually denigrates U.S. staying power to remind the Saudis that Iraq will remain a neighbor long after U.S. troops have returned home. When Saudi Defense Minister Prince Sultan hinted on October 21 that a territorial compromise could be worked out between Iraq and Kuwait after Iraq had withdrawn, Iraqi radio stations trumpeted the apparent softening in the Saudi position. Although Saudi King Fahd subsequently disavowed the statement, saying that it was taken out of context, some unnamed U.S. government analysts concluded that: "Sultan was telling us that time is running out. The U.S. better get going or else we [the Saudis] will have to make our own deal."²⁹ Saudi and Iraqi diplomats remain in contact in many world capitals.

Partial Withdrawal. Even if Baghdad finds no takers for a negotiated partial withdrawal, it could still throw a monkey wrench into the deliberations of the anti-Iraq coalition by unilaterally withdrawing from southern Kuwait and Kuwait City. Many countries wavering over the question of whether to go to war to liberate Kuwait would be even less likely to go to war to liberate a province of Kuwait. The Kuwaiti government, intimidated by its powerful northern neighbor, and despondent over its abandonment by much of the world community, might eventually accede to the new territorial arrangements, allowing Iraq to escape from U.N. economic sanctions. Even after a withdrawal, Iraq will retain tremendous leverage over Kuwait through its control of radical Palestinians living in Kuwait and its ability to destroy Kuwait's oil facilities and southern oil fields through sabotage.

By staging a partial withdrawal from Kuwait, Saddam could minimize the chances of war, while retaining oil-rich strategic territory that would give him a resounding victory that would shore up his own narrow base of power within Iraq and enhance his stature in the Arab world.

CONCLUSION

Time is working against both the U.S. and Iraq in the current crisis. The U.N. embargo is weakening Iraq economically and undermining Iraq's military potential. But Saddam Hussein is unlikely to relinquish Kuwait out of humanitarian concern for his own people, particularly if doing so leaves him vulnerable to overthrow by his own army, which is still seething over his miscalculated invasion of Iran.

29 *Middle East Policy Survey*, November 2, 1990, p. 3.

On balance, America loses more from the passage of time than Iraq. Although the military buildup in the Persian Gulf strengthens U.S. diplomacy, the passage of time dissipates the sense of Iraqi threat, throws up new issues that strain the ad hoc anti-Iraq coalition and increases the natural reluctance of a free democratic people to resort to force. As an Arab leader confronting Western forces on Arab soil, Saddam can score easy propaganda points that undermine the political stability of American allies like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. The longer the stalemate continues, the more Saddam can exploit visceral Arab nationalist, radical revolutionary, and Muslim fundamentalist currents in the Arab world. And the closer Saddam gets to attaining nuclear and biological weapons that will greatly raise the costs of any conflict.

High Stakes. To halt the sense of drift in American policy George Bush and James Baker should clearly explain the stakes in the Persian Gulf to the American people. Saddam Hussein, a brutal dictator armed with weapons of mass destruction, has made a lunge to dominate the Persian Gulf, the strategic storehouse of two-thirds of world oil supplies. What is at stake is not the price of oil, but access to oil, which Saddam is fully capable of taking hostage to blackmail oil-dependent industrial democracies. If Saddam succeeds in looting Kuwait he will use the plundered assets to accelerate the development of his nuclear, missile, and biological weapons programs. This will make him much harder to deter and much costlier to defeat in a future crisis. An Iraqi triumph in Kuwait will radicalize the Middle East, threaten the stability of U.S. allies in the Arab world and ultimately could trigger an Arab-Israeli war that could threaten the survival of Israel, America's closest friend in the Middle East.

Although the risks of forcing Iraq out of Kuwait are significant, the risks of allowing Iraq to digest Kuwait are even greater. The U.S. must work to strengthen the unity of the anti-Iraq coalition to deny Saddam a diplomatic victory that would permit him to extract political, economic or strategic benefits from his aggression. The Soviet Union, responsible for providing Saddam with up to 85 percent of his military arsenal, bears a special responsibility for restraining Saddam. Bush should press Gorbachev to co-sponsor a U.N. Security Council Resolution that will authorize military operations to liberate Kuwait similar to the ones that liberated South Korea in 1950-1953, if Iraq fails to withdraw totally and unconditionally within five days of the resolution's passage.

Credible Threat. Saddam will not withdraw his troops from Kuwait unless credibly threatened with overwhelming force. Confronted with such a formidable global alliance, Saddam might relinquish Kuwait and risk the wrath of his own countrymen, rather than risk a war that he and his regime would not survive. But if he fails to withdraw, a United Nations mandated war against Iraq would be preferable to a Munich-like settlement that would reward Iraqi aggression and leave Saddam Hussein free to plot future aggressions.

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