

# GEO-POLITICS OF THE GULF, 1971-1991

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My previous paper had dealt with the history of the Gulf region up to the year 1971 and its strategic significance through the ages. With the departure of the British in 1971, the colonial phase of the region had come to an end. At that time, it was felt that the British exit would leave a geo-political vacuum in the region. It was also a period when the southern Gulf states were in a nascent political stage and their oil wealth had started altering the living standards of their citizens at an unprecedented pace. In the northern Gulf, the Shah of Iran, who was politically firmly aligned with the West, was trying to modernise and develop his ancient country. He also had grandiose dreams of regional primacy and was rapidly arming towards that end. Iraq was in the grip of Arab nationalism and Saddam Hussein was emerging as an important leader. Overall, the Gulf looked a tranquil place except for an insurgency problem in the Dhofar region of Oman. The aim of this paper is to pick up the thread from there and explore the geo-politics of the region from 1971 to the Gulf War, after which things altered radically. The paper covers the basic political structure and analysis of important geo-political events of the period to achieve a better understanding of a region which is of vital interest to us, as was clearly brought out in the previous paper.

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### AN OVERVIEW OF THE REGION

The riparian states of the Gulf are the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar. In 1971, all of these were hereditary monarchies except Iraq, where the Arab nationalist socialist Al Ba'ath Party was in power. Traditionally, Iran, Iraq, and the KSA are considered medium or regional powers of the Gulf. The rest of them, that is, Oman, Kuwait, UAE, Bahrain and Qatar are smaller countries. Although Oman has a large area, its national resources and indigenous population are small, whereas Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia have large populations, geographical areas and natural resources to categorise them as regional powers. Even the regional powers differ considerably in size and population. The population of Iran (72 million) is three times that of Saudi Arabia (23 million indigenous, estimated) and two and a half times that of Iraq (29 million). Their geographical sizes too differ greatly. Saudi Arabia is about two-third the size of India, though most of it is inhospitable, oil rich desert. Iran is about half our size but much of it is semi-arid or arid. Iraq is somewhat small and is less than one-third the size of Iran, and, once again, mostly desert but also it contains fertile basins of two major rivers, the Euphrates and Tigris. Iraq is also squeezed out from the sea front by the artificial demarcation of colonial boundaries, which has been the cause of much turmoil in recent times. The entire region is rich in hydrocarbon deposits with approximately 61 per cent of the world's oil and 40 per cent of the natural gas reserves being located here.<sup>1</sup> The oil reserves are mainly in Saudi Arabia (22 per cent), Iran (12 per cent), Iraq (9.5 per cent), Kuwait (8.5 per cent), and UAE (8 per cent).<sup>2</sup> Iran, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have large deposits of natural gas too. That is not all: the cost of extraction of oil in the Gulf region as well as the cost of taking it to the nearest sea terminals for export is also minimum. These factors together make it the preeminent location of the world's most prized strategic resource.

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1. While figures differ at different sites, these figures are taken from the "World Oil Year end 2007" and are without the Tar sands of Canada, which are strictly speaking not proven reserves.

2. Ibid.

The Arab Gulf states have been traditionally ruled by tribal chieftains who assumed the titles of Emirs and Sultans under the British patronage. The rulers of these states can be somewhat compared with the enlightened despots of 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe. In tribal structures, they were first among equals in an essentially egalitarian culture. With the coming of oil wealth, of which initially the ruling families were the main beneficiaries, they became fabulously rich and began distancing themselves from the common people by building grand palaces and introducing Western monarchical protocols. Initially, much of the oil wealth was garnered by the so-called royal families and extended royal families, but the continuous inflow of large sums was later sensibly utilised in building world class infrastructure and a welfare state, with all citizens being provided free health services, education, social security and housing. These welfare measures, along with the large influx of expatriate workers from the poorer Arab countries and elsewhere at low wages, especially from South Asia, who were employed in menial as well as skilled work, put the small numbers of indigenous populations in a comfort zone. Therefore while the political space was limited and civic institutions non-existent, there still was a measure of political stability, meaning that if a country has a small population and a large income, you can virtually bribe every citizen.

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Iran and Iraq were also authoritarian states but with different political structures. The Shah of Iran had come back to power through a US engineered coup and was wary of civil liberties. He traced his heritage from ancient Persia and downgraded Islamic institutions and became increasingly autocratic. He tried to structure a quasi-secular state with liberal market policies to keep the upper and middle classes happy. With oil wealth and an alliance with the US, he was trying to make Iran the preeminent military power in the region and was rapidly arming towards this end. To engender a sense of nationalism and pride, he forcibly occupied the strategic islands of Greater and Smaller Tunb and forced joint control of another island, Abu

Moosa, on the UAE with some complicity by the British and the US, though earlier all three had belonged to Sharjah. On the domestic front, he had rapidly modernised infrastructure, while simultaneously crushed political opposition through his feared secret police, Savak, trained by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Mossad. He had also unwisely undermined the clergy, which had strong grassroots support in a deeply conservative society. The Shah had also first imprisoned and then exiled the influential cleric and a strong critic of his policies, Ayatollah Ruhallah Khomeini.

Iraq, on the other hand, had gone through a number of coups since 1958 when the Hashemites, who came to power through British help after World War I, were overthrown by Brig Gen Abdul Karim Qasim. In 1968, the leader of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, Ahmed Hasan Al-Bakir had taken over the reigns of government through another coup, but it was his associate and friend, Saddam Hussein Al-Tikriti who was emerging as an important and influential leader of the party. The Ba'ath Party doctrine, though essentially secular and republican, was based on pan-Arab unity, Arab nationalism and anti-imperial sentiments, with religious identity pushed to the background. But there was no mistaking its quasi-fascist cell-based structure, with an emphasis on withstanding government repression and infiltration. Thus, at the time of the British departure in 1971, all the regimes in the Gulf countries were authoritarian and autocratic but politically stable, albeit meta-stable. In geo-political terms, the Shah of Iran, supported by the West and Saudi Arabia, was trying to fill the so-called regional security vacuum occurring due to the British departure.

It is popularly believed that the southern half of the Gulf consisting of Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Bahrain could conveniently be considered as a sub-region of the wider "Arab World", whereas the northern littoral comprising Iraq and Iran, historically represented a different religio-cultural identity. It may be partly true but as a geo-political region, it represents a fairly homogenous environment with similarities in political, strategic and economic aspects. Historically also, as explained earlier, the migration of Arab tribes to the coast of the Gulf began two centuries preceding the advent of Islam and continued throughout the



subsequent history till the birth of the concept of nation-states in the Gulf during the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, in spite of the complex ethnicity of the region, there is a strain of a composite culture, the so-called *Khalijiat*, prevalent over the region.

#### US INTERESTS IN THE REGION

The US strategic interests in the region have grown over a period of time and coincide with its preeminence during the post-War period. The starting point of US interests in the region comprised the concessions it won from the British for oil extraction in Saudi Arabia with the founding of the Arab American Oil Company (ARAMCO). The emergence of the state of Israel in 1948 was the next step in the enhancement of US interests. But until 1968, when the British announced their intention to give up their military presence in the east of Suez, Washington was maintaining only a supportive role. At that time, the oil-producing states of the region were providing about half the requirements of the Western alliance and 70 per cent those of Japan. In subsequent years, despite its own considerable production, the US had increasingly become dependent on foreign oil, particularly that of the Gulf region. During the period following the oil crisis of 1973, this dependence rose sharply to about 4.9mbpd or about 25 per cent of its total requirements in 1977. In later years, the US has diversified its sources of supply, but oil is fungible, and shortage from any source, especially a source as large as the Gulf, affects prices worldwide. Therefore, the primary US interest became maintaining the unimpeded flow of oil from the Gulf to the West and Japan. Any disruption in oil supplies could have disastrous consequences for the economies of the industrialised world.

Suddenly, following the quadrupling of oil prices in 1973, the Gulf countries had acquired wealth to expand imports on a huge scale. As a result, they had become an important market for American goods. US exports to the region zoomed from \$3.5 billion in 1973 to 12.3 billion in 1977. More importantly, they helped in correcting the balance of account distortions which had come in due to the import of crude oil. A major component of Washington's trade to the region was armaments, and continues to be to date. By 1975, the US had emerged as the number one supplier among the 28

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states supplying military hardware and services to the Gulf countries. While Washington was responsible for well over 50 per cent of the world's arms trade, the Persian Gulf states had accounted for as much as 60 per cent of the orders over the years. Between 1972 and 1978, Iran ordered \$ 19.5 billion worth of arms. One Congressman had referred to it as "the most rapid build-up of military power under peace-time conditions of any nation in the history of the world." Saudi Arabia too imported arms at an enormous scale

during this period though at a lesser scale than Iran. Though Iran became a pariah state post-revolution and Iraq after the Gulf War, the rest of the Gulf countries have been an extremely lucrative market for the US' and, to a lesser extent, the other Western countries' weapon systems. The sale of expensive weapon systems not only helped in addressing the negative balance of trade on account of costly oil imports, but was also useful in ameliorating the research and development costs of these systems.

During the decades of the Seventies and Eighties, containment of Communism was a major US foreign policy objective. Therefore, blocking Soviet expansion southward was another prime US interest in the region. With its long history of involvement in Iran, it was perceived that the Soviet Union would either seek to control the region directly or by increasing its presence significantly in the countries of the region. While oil could not be a primary Soviet objective, since Russia is a net exporter of oil to this day, the region could provide much needed succour towards a long standing need of Russia of a warm water, round-the-year port, and also could be used as a pressure point to counter Soviet weakness elsewhere because of its proximity to its Central Asian domain. The threat became even more viable after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and rapid expansion of the Soviet Navy in the Seventies. Hence, the so-called Carter Doctrine of 1980 came into being. Under the terms of this policy statement, President Carter pledged: "Any attempt by an outside force to gain control of the Persian

Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interest of the United States of America.” The pledge went on to state that the US was prepared to back up its interest with action, saying that such an assault would be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.

Another important US interest in the region is the geo-strategic location of the Gulf. It has been amply explained in the historical perspective, that the Gulf, since the earliest known period of history, has been an important East-West communication link. It occupies a vital location between the three continents. Therefore, any country with aspirations to be a world power, must have a sizeable presence in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea. The Portuguese started it, Britain followed, the US is maintaining it and the USSR tried it during its heyday. The other countries in the race to be a world power, China, India and Russia, regard it as a vital area and may contest it as their economies and, consequently navies, expand. Last, but not the least, Washington is committed to the preservation of the state of Israel. Initially, there was some debate among the US foreign policy planners on whether to support the creation of Israel or not. The opponents argued that Israel, because of the Arab hostility, could prove a strategic liability towards achieving the goal of unimpeded flow of the Gulf oil, while the supporters projected it as a more reliable ally and an important asset in the containment of the USSR in a highly volatile region. It was felt that Israel had a cultural, ideological, political and economic affinity with the West and, therefore, a confluence of interests. Accordingly, a strong public opinion was built up by the rich and influential Jewish and evangelist lobbies in support of the Zionist state. Then onwards, Washington ensured that Israel was built up as the dominant military power in West Asia, and its preservation in a hostile environment became an unwavering US commitment.

During the early years, after the departure of the British, Washington sought to protect its interest through its client states in the region. These were the Nixon years and the policy was known as the Nixon Doctrine or “Twin Pillar” policy. It meant that the Gulf security was left to the Shah of Iran, who had already become militarily the strongest in the region and was supported by a weaker regional power, Saudi Arabia, with the US providing



over the horizon protection. Both were wary of the Arab nationalist, anti-imperialist regime in Iraq and manoeuvred to contain it.<sup>3</sup>

#### SOVIET/RUSSIAN INTERESTS

Historically, Russia has sought influence in Iran since the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a measure of security for its Central Asian domain. Much of Russian expansion in the Central Asian region was at the cost of Iran, and Iranian cultural and linguistic influence in four of these republics gave it a sense of vulnerability. During the 1890s, Russian activity in the region challenged the British influence. They sent naval vessels to the Gulf, tried to ally with the Saudis, subsidised a steamship line from Odessa to the Gulf, and like Germany, had plans to build a railway line with a terminus at a Gulf port. In 1907, Britain and Russia agreed to divide Iran into a Russian sphere in the north and a British one in the south, leaving only a weakened independent government in the centre. The new Soviet government renounced this agreement as an imperial vestige, but soon itself became interested in Iran. A Soviet-Iran Treaty was signed, giving the Russians rights to send troops in Iran if forces threatening the USSR entered Iran. During World War II, the USSR and Britain occupied Iran in 1941 to provide a secure alternate land route for the supply of Western arms and stores to the Soviets in their fight against Nazi Germany. The Soviets were unwilling to vacate Iran at the end of World War II and it took some arm-twisting by the Americans before Stalin agreed to withdraw in 1946, and the two autonomous republics in Azerbaijan and Kurdistan collapsed. Soviet support to the Communist Tudeh Party of Iran continued, but after the US backed CIA engineered coup against the democratically elected liberal Prime Minister Mossadegh and the return of the Shah, Iran became pro-Western. Iran joined the Baghdad Pact in 1955 and signed a security agreement with Washington in 1959. The Soviets objected to both actions. Subsequently, the Shah established good relations with Moscow as a balancing act.

During the Communist era, the primary Soviet interest in the region was preservation of a peaceful Moscow-controlled Soviet Central Asia. The

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3. Markus Kaim, *Great Powers and Regional Order* (Cornwall: MPG Books Ltd.), p. 14.



Islamic revolution in Iran was initially welcomed by the Soviets on account of its hostility to Washington but subsequently it gave rise to fears that the fervour of fundamentalist Islam may spill over to the Muslim republics of Central Asia. After the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, its pacification and maintenance of pro-Soviet socialist regimes became another important Soviet interest. It could not be achieved unless Iran and Pakistan stopped support to various Mujahideen groups. A third Soviet goal in the Gulf was both to prevent from growing, and reduce where possible, American influence in the region. The reduction of American influence was an offensive goal while preventing its growth was a defensive one.

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The Soviets also had a strong interest in maintaining in power governments in the region which were friendly towards Moscow. In addition to the leftist regimes allied to Moscow in Afghanistan, Syria and South Yemen, the Soviet Union wanted to preserve the Ba'athist Iraq for strategic reasons. A fifth goal the Soviets had in the region was to keep the Arab world united in its opposition to Israel. So long as the Arab governments saw Israel as their main enemy and Washington as its closest ally, Moscow could keep them engaged and dependent on its military hardware and opposed to the American foreign policy. In addition, Moscow had a strong interest in seeing that Islamic fundamentalism did not become a strong rival of Marxism Leninism as an ideology for those seeking radical political change in the Gulf and West Asia as a whole.

The Soviets had other, more long-term, goals in the region such as historical quest for an all-weather warm water outlet, promotion of Marxist ideology, and control of the region's oil resources. As a superpower rivalling the US, they could not ignore its strategic location, and with the expansion of the Soviet Navy, it became feasible to display their flag in the Arabian Sea and the Gulf with tangible presence. Towards these aims, they made diplomatic efforts to establish good relations with the conservative governments of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). From 1963 to 1985,

the USSR had diplomatic relations with only one GCC state: Kuwait. The others were all anti-Soviet and cooperated with the US and Britain. In 1985, however, Moscow succeeded in establishing relations with both Oman and the UAE. Soviet contact with Saudi Arabia also increased. All these efforts were aimed at reducing the US influence in the region.

### IRANIAN REVOLUTION

Iran's Islamic revolution in February 1978 was a unique event in the history of the Islamic world. Never before had clerics taken over the reigns of a Muslim country through a popular revolution or otherwise after the Umayyads changed the contours of the Islamic state around 675 A.D., approximately 43 years after the death of Prophet Mohammed. Initially, the revolution was populist, nationalist with a tinge of socialism but later became Shia Islamic. Accordingly, during the early period of the revolution, the clerical community was involved in an existentialist struggle with the nationalists and the leftist Tudeh Party. They managed to eliminate or exile most of their opponents through better grassroots support and organisational structure, and consolidated their hold on power under the charismatic leadership of Ayatullah Ruhallah Khomeini.

Much has been written about the causes of the revolution. Some historians believe that its foundation was laid when the democratically elected government of Mossadegh was overthrown in 1953 with the help of the United States. This also changed the republican image of Washington in popular Iranian imagination vis-à-vis Britain and Russia which were seen as imperialist and predatory due to their machinations during the 19<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Shah was perceived by many as beholden to America whose culture was corrupting that of Iran and eroding Islamic values, and the US was now seen as the Shah's partner in cruel political repression through the Savak, and became another focus of public ire. The glorification of ancient Persia and undermining of the Islamic past, sidelining of the powerful Shia clergy, an attempt at rapid modernisation and Westernisation of a conservative society, an overly ambitious economic and militarisation programme which caused shortages and inflation and

created economic bottlenecks, and autocratic policies are some of the other reasons put forward as the causes of the Shah's fall.

Post revolution, a large part of the Muslim *Ummah* looked at Iran with great expectations. No government of a Muslim country had promised to be entirely guided by the *Quran* and the *Sunnah* and the democratic principles enshrined in the Medina model since 675 AD, as mentioned earlier. The nostalgia for the Utopian Medina model is deep in the Muslim psyche. But, unfortunately for Iran and the region, instead of concentrating on creating and institutionalising a just, efficient and accountable state on the cherished Medina model as was professed, focus shifted towards external affairs. The main thrust shifted to exporting the revolution across the borders. The grand aim was to revolutionise the entire Islamic world, but the early targets were the authoritarian regimes of the Arab neighbours. This resulted in a sharp deterioration of relations with the Arab world and more specifically with the monarchies of the southern Gulf and Ba'athist Iraq. **Iraq felt most threatened by the Iranian propaganda because more than 50 percent of its population is Shia.** Iraq felt most threatened by the Iranian propaganda because more than 50 percent of its population is Shia and another 20 percent comprises the Kurd who have greater affinity to the Persian culture and, like them, claim Aryan descent. Further, Iranian hostility against the US, aggravated by the hostage crises of 1979 to early 1981, and the rhetoric against the godless Soviets resulted in consolidating the opposition to the theocratic regime.

#### THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR

The causes of the Iran-Iraq War cannot be explained purely in historical terms of conflict between the Persians and the Arabs or the vulnerabilities Iraq perceived from the revolutionary rhetoric of Iran, as stated earlier, though both played their part. The more important reasons were related to contemporary geo-politics. Firstly, the Algiers Accord of 1975 was grudgingly agreed to by Iraq under pressure from Iran due to its overwhelming military superiority and the international leverage it enjoyed because of a special

relationship with Washington. It, nevertheless, left Iraq with a sense of grievance over the partial loss of sovereignty on the waters of the Shatt-al-Arab. Secondly, the Baghdad regime believed that it had the opportunity to wrest the dominance of the Gulf from Iran and push its territorial and other claims. Thirdly, the personality of Saddam played a key role. In spite of great oil wealth, a sizeable population and a now strong military, Iraq was unable to play a central role in Arab affairs, due to the preeminence of Egypt and Syria in an anti-Israel coalition, a favourite Arab cause. Syrian primacy particularly irked him as it was ruled by a rival Ba'ath faction. His ambitious, vain and adventurous nature saw it as an ideal opportunity to play the knight in shining armour, in the mould of his hero Salauddin, defending the Arab cause against the marauding Persians. As the war progressed with its rise and ebb, his theme of protection of the "Eastern gateway to the Arab nation" became the main propaganda tool of the Iraqi President. Therefore, no amount of financial support given by Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the other Gulf principalities was adequate. The wavering of any Arab's support anywhere became tantamount to national betrayal. He was particularly severe on any Gulf regime which showed even the slightest amount of hesitation in opening its purse strings as he was primarily waging this war to protect the Gulf from the demonic Persians. It did not matter to him that the Gulf nations did not ask him to defend the "Eastern gateway", and left on their own, would prefer to live in peace and amity with their northern neighbour.

Saddam had calculated that the chaotic conditions prevailing in Iran due to the civil strife and fragmentation of the Iranian Army would allow him a swift victory, ending the Iranian threat once and for all, and he would regain full sovereignty over the Shatt-al-Arab as an added benefit. Initial victories and rapid advance of the Iraqi Army further strengthened his view that the adventure was paying off. Unfortunately for him, the external threat united the warring domestic factions in Iran, with the clergy getting the upper hand. They were not only able to repel the Iraqi attack but crossed over to the Iraqi territory in their own offensive after two years of the war. Had Iran been satisfied with its achievement and agreed to



peace negotiations, the course of events in the region would have been different. But once again, the personality of a leader played an important part in determining the course of events in the Gulf. Ayatollah Khomeini was not one to easily forgive and forget. He was determined to punish and humiliate Saddam by toppling his regime and establish a Shia dominated Islamic regime in Iraq.

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The turning point was the Iranian crossover into Iraqi territory and occupation of the Fao Peninsula. The other Gulf regimes, which had been lukewarm to the war and feared its effect, suddenly felt threatened. It became clear to them that a decisive Iranian victory would inevitably impose an Iranian hegemony and seriously threaten all the Gulf regimes. They all rallied to support Iraq, politically and financially. It is estimated that Saudi Arabia provided Iraq with \$26 billion, Kuwait with \$12 billion and Qatar and the UAE smaller sums, besides other facilities. At the end of it, the Gulf countries believed that they had given all they could in spite of their own difficult circumstances due to low oil prices during the late Eighties, but the Iraqi President believed that these countries had given only a little, considering what they had and the great service he had provided them. In the wider Arab world, Yemen, Egypt and Jordan supported Iraq, while Syria and Algeria were aligned with Iran. The other Arab countries were more or less neutral.

As of the superpowers, initially the USSR had welcomed the Iranian revolution because of its hostility to the US, and hoped to improve its relations with Iran. Therefore, during the days of war, in spite of its close relations with Iraq, its reaction was guarded, not willing to offend Iran. Though military spares continued to flow, an embargo was placed on new sophisticated weapons. Initially, the US too was very circumspect and sympathetic to Iraq, but when it thought that an Iraqi victory could prove advantageous to the USSR, along with Israel, it indulged in an unprincipled and infamous operation popularly known as "Iran Gate" to assist Iran under

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which military spares were supplied to Iran through Israel. But soon the two superpowers assessed that Iran with its revolutionary Islamist ideology posed a common threat to their interest alike. Hence, when the tide of war began to turn in favour of Iran and an Iraqi defeat appeared imminent, the superpowers as well as the industrialised nations in general became aligned with Iraq. This alignment took the form of the supply of advanced weapons, credit facilities from international institutions and sensitive military information as most of the Iranian weapons were of Western origin. The irony of the situation was that much of this arsenal which the East and the West banded together to provide Iraq, contributed a great deal in precipitating the Gulf War later. It also exposed the short-sightedness of Washington's Gulf policy. Finally, the end of the Iran-Iraq War came when Ayatollah Khomeini accepted the ceasefire due to the exhaustion of war. Blatant and large scale military intervention by the US during the final stages of war, when the Iranian Navy suffered huge losses, also played its part.

The Iran-Iraq War was the most destructive war in the history of the Gulf. The two potentially rich nations were reduced to penury. Both sides claimed victory. But the truth is that the war ended where it began. The material losses for Iraq have been estimated at \$500 billion, while Iran estimated its own losses up to a trillion dollars. Both sides suffered nearly a million casualties in human terms.

**THE PRELUDE AND THE BUILD-UP OF THE GULF WAR**

In the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War, inter-Arab relations had reached an equilibrium not seen in recent times. Egypt was back in the Arab fold after a brief period of isolation following its contractual peace with Israel, thanks to sustained support from Iraq. Ironically, it was Iraq that had taken the lead in 1978-79 in imposing sanctions on Egypt. But the two had come together in a loosely grouped Arab majority bloc against Iran during the hostilities. The bloc also included Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Morocco, and the smaller Gulf

countries. Egypt was fully reinstated to its former pivotal position in the Arab bloc at the 1989 Casablanca Arab Summit. By the end of the decade, every Arab country except Libya had reopened its embassy in Cairo.

It was also the period when the Arab countries in general were in the throes of pressing domestic problems. The Iran-Iraq War and constant confrontation with Israel had taken a toll on their economic reserves. Falling oil generated revenues, rapidly increasing populations, skewed development, and the looming threat of political Islam, all seemed to necessitate an Arab political order, which would concentrate on economic development and inter-state cooperation. The imminent European Community (EC) economic union reinforced further the notion that if the Arab world was to avoid being marginalised in the international system, it needed to create new cooperative structures. To these ends, two new structures were created in 1989. The first, the four-member Arab Cooperation Council (ACC) was composed of Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and Yemen. Iraq, with the active cooperation of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) which played a leading role in its creation. The second was the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), composed of the five Arab states of North Africa. The six-member Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) composed of Saudi Arabia, Oman, UAE, Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain was created in 1981 at the height of the Iran-Iraq War when these countries felt most threatened, first by Iraq, when it looked like winning the war, and, later by Iran. Apparently, its aim was economic, cultural, scientific and technological cooperation, but there was no mistaking the security underpinnings. At this juncture, Syria was the only major country standing apart from these developments due to the long-standing enmity with Iraq owing to geo-political, ideological, and personality differences between the two dictators.

Along with these groupings, Saddam's stature as an all Arab leader had also risen. His espousing of the Egyptian cause, rhetoric against Israel at every Arab forum, a large standing army, the belief that he had saved Arabs from the Iranian menace, and off and on belligerence against the US, all played up in the Iraqi media and the media of some other Arab countries had given him a larger than life image in the Arab street which tended to overlook his many failings and mercurial nature. But beneath all the rhetoric of victory and the

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creator of victory (ie.Saddam), the Iraqi President was a worried man. The war had encumbered him with a debt of \$90 billion. The financial support from the Gulf countries was down to a trickle. The long war of eight years had eroded his firm grip on the oppressive political system in general and the loyalty of the military to his personal rule in particular. He saw the several attempts at his life by military officers as ample poof of it. There was nothing on the ground to show as fruits of victory. He had been unable to extend Iraq's sovereignty over the entire Shatt-al-Arab waterway, the main reason for the war. Nor was he able to change the Iranian regime. The Iraqi people, accustomed to a certain level of prosperity in the pre-war years, were thoroughly disillusioned due to scarcity and even grinding poverty of certain sections of the society. Under these distressing circumstances, perhaps, the President's beleaguered mind reasoned in favour of adventurism as the safest way to shore up his regime against possible dissent. As time passed, he became increasingly convinced that the invasion and annexation of Kuwait was the only way for Iraq to be bailed out.

But he had to reckon with possible strong reactions from the Arabs, Washington, and the other countries of the Western world. He was reasonably sure of the support from the PLO and Jordan, as some say he promised them a share of the booty. Egypt, he felt was deeply obliged to him and had only returned to the Arab fold under his patronage. Moreover, nearly two million Egyptians employed in Iraq, who were making a substantial contribution to Egypt's precarious economy, could not be easily ignored. He did not have too high an opinion of Fahd Bin Abdal Aziz of Saudi Arabia. He considered him a weak and indecisive leader, in fact, on one occasion during the Iran-Iraq War when he advised caution, Saddam accused him of cowardice. He also knew of his squeamishness about the presence of US military personnel in Saudi Arabia due to domestic sentiments. He was familiar enough with the monarch to know that he would defer painful, difficult decisions as



long as possible. Saddam had also exploited King Fahd's visit to Iraq after the end of the Iraq-Iran War. The visit was made at the urging of the Iraqi President who arranged a warm official and popular reception for the King. He asked the King to sign a non-aggression pact between the Kingdom and Iraq. The request seemed strange to the King in view of the close relations to the countries. Nevertheless, the King acceded to the request. He was, therefore confident that the Kingdom would not permit its territory to be used by foreign forces, regardless of circumstances.

Saddam Hussein had excellent tactical acumen, but like most dictators, his strategic perceptions were poor. He thought of President Bush as another version of his predecessors who were eager to avoid military confrontation and would be content with a boycott or sanctions. He was completely prepared to confront such reactions. Moreover, he believed that, after a reasonable period of time, guaranteeing the flow of oil at low prices would suffice to convince the US to accept the invasion as a *fait accompli* as Kuwait was not bound to the United States by any security pact. He also failed to take into consideration the altered circumstances of the USSR. President Gorbachov had initiated *Perestroika* and *Glasnost* or reconstruction and openness, with a view to completely reform the degenerating Communist system. He was convinced that his success depended a great deal on economic aid from Germany, France and the US to lift the Soviet economy. The Soviet Union of yore would have been quick to oppose and, if need be, use its veto in the UN Security Council to thwart any American initiative. But under these changed circumstances, Gorbachov was not to defend Hussein's Kuwait adventure at the cost of strategically important relations with the West and UK. Saddam, to the contrary, assessed that he would be providing the Soviet Union a golden opportunity to reassert itself as a superpower, which it could not possibly ignore.

The idea of invasion and annexation of Kuwait as the ultimate answer to all his problems having taken root in Saddam's mind, and having assessed world and Arab environments as conducive and favourable to it, he was now ready to make his move. He first presented to the Gulf countries for concurrence his strategic vision which included Warbah and

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Bubiyan Islands and other military bases in the GCC countries. This was, as expected, rejected by the Gulf countries. He accused them of completely selling out to the Americans and spoke repeatedly and vehemently against American military presence in the Gulf. Several months after the Iran-Iraq War, he sent envoys to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to ask them for a loan amounting to \$10 billion to tide over post-war economic problems. Saudi Arabia promised to examine the matter whereas Kuwait offered a more modest sum, citing its own difficulties. Saddam felt that this was a humiliating response. Iraq had also demanded cancellation of its Kuwaiti debt, running into billions of dollars. Kuwait refused and continued to send routine reminders of the accounts to be settled between the two countries. This added fuel to the fire, but the ultimate provocation came when Kuwait and the UAE refused to accede to Iraq's request to decrease oil production to enable Iraq to sell a larger amount of its oil. Saddam also accused Kuwait of stealing oil from the Rumailah oilfield which straddles the border of Kuwait and Iraq. He called it a blatant act of aggression. The casebook against Kuwait was getting thicker.

Iraq's claim to Kuwait is an old one, going back to the 1930s when King Ghazi first proffered the claim. He wanted to consolidate and expand Iraq all over the Al-Hilal al Khaseeb (fertile crescent) from Syria to the Gulf. Ghazi tried to induce union of the two countries and succeeded in convincing the advisory council to the Kuwaiti ruler to pass the resolution advocating the union. Kuwait had then hoped to gain from the union because it was not oil rich. But under British pressure, the Sheikh of Kuwait disowned and disbanded the council. The Iraqi claim on Kuwait was based on the fact that during the Ottoman rule, Kuwait was administered as a *vilayat* of Basra. Subsequent Iraqi governments, including Saddam Hussein's, had never renounced their claims to Kuwait, and had avoided settling the issue of final borders between the two countries.

Another development which Baghdad interpreted as conducive to annexation was a round of intense political activity in Kuwait during that period, demanding greater pluralism and popular participation in the decision-making process. This had taken the form of the Kuwaiti Opposition's mobilisation of public opinion to demand the return of the elected National Assembly, which the Emir had disbanded four years earlier. It was only under pressure from the Opposition, that when Kuwait was compelled to seek American protection for its tankers in the final phase of Iran-Iraq War, it denied permission to American warships to enter its territorial waters or allow American helicopters to land on its territory. Saddam concluded from the domestic political situation in Kuwait that he would receive a big welcome there, at least from the Opposition.

The stage was now set for Baghdad to precipitate the situation in a manner that would show Kuwait as uncooperative and belligerent, and when the annexation occurred, its own culpability would either be condoned or there would be a minimum adverse reaction. Saddam made his next move by addressing some impossible demands to Kuwait, which, among others, included, cancellation of the Iraqi debt of some \$12 billion, compensation for oil taken from Rumaylah oilfield amounting to \$2.4 billion and lease of the islands of Bubiyan and Warbah at virtually nothing. In addition, Iraq demanded an enormous unspecified sum as the nucleus of an Arab Marshall Plan for the reconstruction of Iraq from the damage sustained during the Iraq-Iran War. The demand for the nucleus funds was addressed to the other GCC countries also. The Kuwaiti government viewed these demands as egregious, especially when there was no accompanying offer for a final and comprehensive settlement of the long standing Iraq-Kuwait border dispute. Kuwait concluded that acceding to these demands would mean the end of Kuwait as an independent state.

At the Amman Summit held in early 1990, the Iraqi President talked of Kuwaiti belligerence and hinted at the gravity of the situation. This was followed by many statements made by King Hussain and Yasir Arafat, which alluded to fears of approaching wars. Such signalling reached a peak at the Baghdad Summit, which was held weeks before the invasion. It was

here that with bitter sarcasm the Iraqi President told the Emir that he would “surprise him” with a visit to Kuwait and would “surprise him” with a comprehensive, final solution to the border issue. The poor Emir did not understand the sarcasm and received both these surprises warmly. Now onwards, Saddam or his Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz would complain of Kuwait’s intransigence at every Arab forum and accuse it of stealing oil from Rumailah, hatching a conspiracy to glut the oil market to deprive Iraq of a fair price for its oil, demand compensation running into billions of dollars and a complete moratorium on Iraq’s entire war-time loan. He also frequently accused Kuwait and the UAE of conspiring with “world imperialism and Zionism” to cut the livelihood of the Arab nation. He cautioned, “If words fail to afford us protection, then we will have no choice but resort to effective action to put things right and ensure restitution of our rights.”

Amidst all this sabre rattling, on July 25, 1990, Saddam summoned the US Ambassador to Baghdad, Ms April Gillespie, to what was to become one of the most crucial and controversial meetings. We may never know the truth of what really transpired, but she reportedly told him that Washington was not inclined to taking sides in the internal Arab disputes. To be fair to her, she was summoned at short notice and was perhaps ill prepared for the meeting and failed to understand his real intentions. Whatever the actual contents of their conversation, Saddam emerged from the meeting confident of America’s neutrality towards the possible occupation of Kuwait. Still, he projected an appearance of Iraqi moderation and agreed to a Saudi mediated meeting to resolve the issues. The meeting was held on July 31, 1990, in the Saudi city of Jeddah to make a last ditch effort at preventing the blood-letting between the two neighbours. By this time, Saddam had perhaps already made up his mind to invade Kuwait, therefore Izzat Ibrahim, the Iraqi Vice President was unwilling to accept anything except complete capitulation by Kuwait. Saad al-Abdullah, the Crown Prince of Kuwait had an open mind but was unwilling to capitulate. He recommended postponing the discussion until the next meeting which was to be held in Baghdad. He reportedly excused himself from the meeting on the pretext of a headache.



On the August 1, 1990, the talks collapsed amidst mutual recrimination. Kuwait was invaded a day later.

#### THE GULF WAR

The causes and political manoeuvres leading to the invasion of Kuwait have been described in some detail because they highlight the perennial problems of the Gulf security and Arab politics in general. The occupation itself was swift and carried out with rare effectiveness. The reaction of the Gulf states was of shock and complete disbelief. Despite the warning signs, none of the Gulf leaders believed that Saddam could dare to occupy a sovereign Kuwait. Such was their disbelief that during the early days of the invasion of the Gulf, radio and television broadcasts refrained from mentioning the invasion altogether. There was a consensus that this was only a transient move by the mercurial leader and soon things would return to normal. When the shock wore off, every Arab forum was activated to find an Arab solution to the crisis. The hectic activity in every Arab capital and the countless delegations to and fro the crisis area were of no avail, and within a few days, it was clear that a mutually acceptable solution between the intransigents was not feasible. The diplomatic activity culminated in the Arab nations being for or against Iraq. Jordan, Yemen, the PLO, Tunisia, Mauritania and Sudan sided with Iraq. Algeria was close to neutrality, despite its inclination towards Iraq. The other Arab countries lined up behind Kuwait, condemned the aggression and welcomed the forces that were coming to repel it.

Reaction in the Western capitals was no different. In spite of highly advanced surveillance systems and intensive intelligent network, none of the leaders had a definite warning of the invasion. The Iraqi military concentration on the Kuwaiti border was no secret, but was dismissed as the usual sabre rattling by the Iraqi dictator, and his lethal intentions could not

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be guessed. The US, calling it a serious threat to world peace, called for an emergency meeting of the Security Council within hours of the invasion. Iraq attempted to justify its action, stating that it was invited by a group of revolutionaries who had successfully staged a *coup d'état* and Iraq was staying on to assist a "free provisional government of Kuwait" to restore order. The Council rejected the Iraqi contention and passed Resolution 660 with the support of 14 members, with only Yemen abstaining, condemning the invasion and demanding Iraq's unconditional and immediate withdrawal. Iraq rejected the resolution as unjust and iniquitous. Kuwait welcomed the resolution, accused Iraq of expropriating its resources and called upon the Security Council to see that the wishes of the international community were carried out by imposition of sanctions against Iraq for its refusal to withdraw.

Meanwhile, the United States, the European Community, Japan, Canada and the Soviet Union had already declared measures against Iraq like freezing of assets, ban on oil supplies, and embargo on weapon shipments. To legitimise the sanctions, Resolution 661 was adopted on August 6, 1990, which imposed a worldwide oil embargo and comprehensive sanctions banning economic and financial dealings with Iraq and Kuwait, and prohibiting imports from, and exports to, the two oil rich countries. Resolution 661 allowed supply of foodstuff and medical goods under humanitarian circumstances. The committee included all members of the Security Council. The voting was 13-0-2, with Cuba and Yemen abstaining. On the two previous occasions when such sanctions were imposed on Southern Rhodesia in 1967 and South Africa in 1977, they were found to be ineffective. But this time, the US and the allies were far more determined to make them work. A virtual naval blockade was enforced by the ships of the alliance and all ships approaching Iraq or Kuwait were interdicted. Saddam Hussein formally annexed Kuwait on August 8, 1990, claiming it was part of Iraq.

While the Arab and other Western countries were nonplussed and ambivalent as to the action to be taken against Iraq, the US President had decided that come what may, Saddam Hussein would not be allowed to keep Kuwait, and if war was the only way out, then there was no flinching from it. He hastened to freeze Iraqi and Kuwaiti assets in American financial institutions and ordered the State Department to begin a campaign to condemn the invasion inside and outside the UN. He spent long hours on the telephone in an attempt to mobilise an alliance to counter the invasion. The only existing contingency plan for the Gulf region was based on a probable Soviet attack. The President ordered the immediate implementation of the plan, with necessary adjustments to suit the circumstances of the Iraqi invasion.

The Vietnam War had taught Washington that it must not intervene militarily unless such intervention was dictated by absolute national interest and was accompanied by a clear objective and adequate forces. Accordingly, symbolic military measures such as air and naval raids, were excluded as an option. The first batch of forces totalled close to a quarter million soldiers. When this number was in place, the American President decided to double it, leaving little to chance. With half a million personnel and an enormous amount of war material in place, it became impossible to retreat without the unconditional and complete liberation of Kuwait.

How could George H. W. Bush take such firm and peremptory action within a short time? One plausible reason, besides others is that, prior to joining politics, he had worked in the oil industry of Texas. Thus, the strategic dimensions of the invasion of Kuwait were clear in his mind from the outset. Iraq and Kuwait together held oil resources comparable with Saudi Arabia. Their manipulation by such a mercurial, ambitious and unpredictable dictator could prove to be deep trouble for the industrialised economies. Moreover, in Washington's view, the threat to other Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, could not be discounted, despite the Iraqi President's protestations to the contrary. In addition to strategic calculations, scenes of the invasion on American television and other media coverage aroused feelings of anger and disgust against Iraq and sympathy towards the small victim, making it easier for the US President to get the political consensus.

After the decision had been taken to oppose the invasion by all means available, Washington played its cards right. On November 29, 1990, the use of force was endorsed by the Security Council when it adopted Resolution 678 under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. The resolution was valid 12-2-1, in which China abstained, and Cuba and Yemen opposed. The actual words “use of force” were not used but there was no doubt that it was covered under “all necessary means”. Iraq was given the ultimatum to implement all the Security Council resolutions and vacate Kuwait latest by January 15, 1991.

When the war came, it was swift and decisive. The conduct of the war is not the subject of this paper and much has already been written about it. Contrary to popular belief, Saddam did not give in easily. He planned to turn Kuwait into the largest battlefield since World War II and amassed half a million soldiers on its territory. He took many measures, such as holding foreign citizens hostages in an attempt to prevent an attack before the completion of his preparations, planted explosives in all the oil wells in Kuwait, and threatened to detonate them in case of an attack, and also made preparations to pollute the entire Gulf by pumping oil into it as a last ditch measure. He planned to turn the land borders into killing fields. He bragged that it would be the “Mother of All Battles”. If the attacker escaped the mines, he would be torn to pieces by the artillery, if he escaped the artillery, he would fall in the burning trenches. But his plans were simplistic and could not be implemented due to the many force multipliers used by the US. He did not realise that the technological gap between the adversaries was too large. An army equipped and tactically arranged on the pattern of World War II, could not possibly defeat an army preparing for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

However, the Iraqi President was clever enough to ensure his survival in defeat. He did not hazard his air force against much superior opposition nor commit many units of his elite and fiercely loyal Republican Guard to any offensive action which could lead to heavy casualties. He needed them to deal with the post-war climate, which was later illustrated by their brutal suppression of the Shiite uprising in Southern Iraq in the wake of the war. After the air campaign had completely unravelled Iraq’s infrastructure,



the Allied ground offensive began in late February 1991. Saddam soon realised that his plans had gone completely awry. In less than 48 hours of the start of the ground offensive, around midnight of February 25, 1991, Saddam publicly ordered his troops to withdraw in an organised way from Kuwait. Two days later, he agreed to honour all relevant UN Resolutions. On February 28, 1991, President Bush called a halt to all war operations.

Two significant questions remain regarding the Gulf War, which are difficult to answer and have had a profound effect on the Gulf's geo-politics during the post-war years. The first: why did Saddam reject various face-saving formulas when it had become clear that he could not keep Kuwait and war could be his undoing? And the second: why did President Bush leave his regime intact, despite knowing his adventurist nature and the dangers he might pose to American interests and the stability in the region?

Perhaps, the answer to the first is that that the gambler that Saddam was, he could not abandon such a big bet midway. Dictators fear nothing more than the loss of face. Many have killed themselves rather than lose face. He could have withdrawn if he had succeeded in installing a puppet regime in Kuwait. Having failed in that, he just could not afford to be seen withdrawing under American pressure. After a certain point, Washington too did not want him to withdraw, as it had plans to extract the cost of operations from the GCC states, the European allies and Japan, as it later did. It was a period when the US economy was not doing too well. If the war did not take place, it would be difficult to convince them to part with adequate money, whereas enormous expenditure had already been incurred by the US in amassing half a million troops and the war material. Hence, Washington continued to use intemperate language and threats to psyche him. More or less, this was confirmed to me by the US defence attaché, Col Smith, posted in Oman at that time. Saddam also had notions of turning a military defeat into a political victory like his hero Nasser did during the Suez crisis. It is only in hindsight that one can say that his calculations went horribly awry.

The answer to the second question is even more difficult to guess. The US President held all the cards and should have foreseen the problems

Saddam was to later cause from Washington's point of view. Henry Kissinger cites three probable reasons<sup>4</sup>. Firstly, the highest officials of the US Administration had testified before Congress and assured the international community that America's sole objective was liberation of Kuwait. With that objective accomplished or acceded, domestic and international support for continuing the war was in danger of eroding. Secondly, it was feared that the disintegration of Iraq and success of the Shiite rebellion might produce an Iran leaning republic, thereby, aggravating the Gulf situation. It was also hoped that internal turmoil due to Saddam's heavy defeat would lead to the formation of another Sunni dominated regime minus Saddam. And, lastly, the prospects of an independent or autonomous Kurd republic in the north were highly disconcerting to Turkey, a close and reliable American ally in West Asia. Whatever may be the truth, underestimating Saddam's staying power would cost the US dear, as events later proved.

#### CONCLUSION

The period from 1971 to 1991 was a stormy one in the geo-politics of the Gulf. It started with the British withdrawal after an overwhelming presence of 150 years. Besides the riparian states, the United States and the Soviets/Russia also had, and continue to have, abiding interests in the region. Initially, the Shah of Iran tried to fill the so-called security vacuum left by the British departure with the support of the US and a large scale military build-up towards a regional hegemony. Accordingly, during the decade of the 1970s, the US was happy to manage its interests in the region through its client states, Iran and Saudi Arabia, with outside support from Israel. The Soviets too had allies in the region, such as South Yemen, Iraq and Syria. A state of equilibrium, if not complete stability, existed during the period. Both the superpowers contested for influence but carefully avoided a blow-up.

The Iranian revolution of 1978 and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 changed the geo-political picture radically and Washington started

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4. Henry Kissinger, *Does America Need a Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), p. 190.

getting more deeply involved in the region. But much of the instability during the period was caused by the regional rivalry between the two medium powers of the Gulf, Iraq and Iran, and its geo-political fallout. Personalities of the leaders of the two countries and the different state ideologies also played a part. The heavy military presence of the US and its policies added to the friction. The resulting two devastating wars of the period left the medium powers weakened but not entirely out of contention. Perhaps, a more restrained behaviour and political sagacity from the leaders of Iran and Iraq, and a less expedient and far-sighted outlook from the US in its Gulf policy, could have avoided the tragedy of the two devastating wars of the period.