MERIA

AN ESSAY ON ARAB LESSONS FROM THE 1991 KUWAIT CRISIS AND WAR

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For a long time after the 1991 war over Kuwait, that event seemed to mark a turning point in the region, along with such contemporary developments as the Soviet Union's collapse, the Cold War's end, and the Madrid conference's commencement of direct Arab-Israeli peace negotiations. A decade after the fighting, however, the changes seem to have been more limited or perhaps relatively temporary ones. This article tries to assess what has and has not changed in the Middle East during the decade since the Kuwait crisis.

How did the 1990-1991 Kuwait crisis and the ensuing war affect Arab politics and polities during the decade that followed?

Addressing this question during the years between 1991 and 2000 might well have produced an analysis seeing that Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and subsequent defeat--along with several other contemporaneous events--as a turning point in Middle Eastern history. Those additional developments included the Soviet Union's collapse, the Cold War's end, and the emergence of the United States as the world's sole superpower.

By seizing and annexing Kuwait, Iraq had shown a disregard for its neighbors' sovereignty so great that it provoked the near-unanimous condemnation of Arab states to the point that they backed a war to expel its presence. Moreover, they allied with the non-Arab (and often harshly criticized) United States in this conflict. Egypt and Syria sent troops, and the Arab world endorsed tough sanctions against the Iraqi regime. Each of these steps was unprecedented.

Clearly, such steps were provoked by powerful motives. In the case of Kuwait and the other Gulf monarchies, there was a clear and rational fear that Iraq might well extinguish their independence altogether and loot their assets. For other Arab states, notably Egypt, Iraq posed a threat to seize the leadership of the Arab world and to involve it in new and ultimately disastrous adventures. A few countries--like Jordan and Yemen, as well as the PLO--supported Iraq, and Saddam Hussein's case had some real appeal for the Arab masses. But Saddam's popularity seemed threatening to other Arab leaders. Indeed, it appeared to endanger their survival just as much as did his aggressive behavior.(1)

In response to these trends and events, it seemed as if an era of pragmatism and moderation was developing in the region. Features of this shift appeared to include:

--A decline in Pan-Arab nationalism.

--Increasing political differences among Arab countries and their legitimacy as individual nation-states, including willingness to take steps in their own interests even if it broke with the previous Arab consensus and ideology.

--An increasing willingness of moderate Arab (especially Gulf Arab) states to work closely with Washington,

--Some discernible progress toward more open societies, stronger civil societies, and democratization.

--The weakening of radical regimes and their isolation from each other as well as within the region as a whole.

--The hope that Syria would join the moderate camp.

--The expectation that Iraq's regime would remain isolated and weak, perhaps even falling from power.

--A successfully advancing Arab-Israeli peace process.

--The failure of radical Islamist movements to seize power or expand the revolutionary threats they posed to Arab governments.(2)

--A relevant, if non-Arab, factor was the growth of a reform movement in Iran which enjoyed support from an overwhelming majority of the population there. This possibility of a triumph for moderation in Iran would undercut the strength of Islamist, radical, anti-American, and anti-peace process forces in the Arab world as well.

--The need to take into account the military lessons of the 1991 war. On the one hand, this meant the relative obsolescence of the Arab armies which did not have high-technology arms, and on the other hand an increasing interest (though not necessarily success) in obtaining Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), especially missiles.(3)

In this context, then, the Kuwait crisis created--or at least played an important part in--a major transition for the region.

By the year 2001, however, these hopes were thrown into question or even refuted. The most obvious of these problems was the collapse of the Israel-Palestinian and Israel-Syrian peace processes. While the details of these events can be debated and analyzed in many ways, the fundamental problem was the difficulty for Syria or the Palestinians in making peace with Israel even in the context of major and extensive Israeli concessions.

As important as this breakdown was, however, it was not an isolated occurrence. A number of other developments were increasingly clear during the period coinciding roughly with the tenth anniversary of the Gulf war in January 2001:

--The Arab-Israeli conflict was not fading from the scene as much as had been hoped. Especially important was the fact that moderate states were not ready to put pressure or even strong encouragement on Syria and the Palestinians to make a compromise agreement, even one based on meeting roughly 95 percent of their demands.

--The prospects for serious economic or political reform in Syria seemed to fade as new President Bashar al-Asad decided to follow many of the policies of his father and predecessor. He limited change and cracked down on dissent.(4)

--Individual nation-states were still wary of Pan-Arab nationalism's appeal, limiting their own autonomy.

--Leaders took the safer, easier path of accepting and even intensifying public opinion on key issues, including Arab-Israeli relations. They made little attempt to change the views of the masses, which continued to accept many of the ideas that had held sway before 1990. It should be noted that public opinion is not an unchangeable force of nature but a also construct. With their sweeping control over public debate through the media, educational system, repression, and other means, Arab leaders have more control over this sector than do their counterparts in other countries.

--In general, the tone of government propaganda and rhetoric, as well as a media highly influenced by the state, remained largely unchanged.

--Progress toward democracy or just the creation of a strong civil society remained extremely limited. Even Egypt cracked down on nonpartisan human rights groups and research centers that made mild criticisms of government policy.

--Weapons of Mass Destruction, especially missiles, proliferated in the region. Iraq and Iran were on the verge of obtaining nuclear weapons. In part, the choice of such arms was a response to the high cost of conventional weapons, as well as their being seen as a powerful means of projecting influence onto neighbors.

--While Moscow's role remained far more limited than that of the historic Soviet Union, it began to return as a factor countering U.S. influence. This channel

became particularly significant in the proliferation of weaponry and opposition to American sanctions on Iran and Iraq. In contrast to the Cold War era, Russia was usually more interested in profits than in political influence. By the same token, its military supply relationship with Syria was held up by that country's inability to pay past debts.(5)

--The 1990-1991 anti-Iraq coalition was steadily weakened, with Russia, France, and China all opposing the sanctions on Iraq and some other U.S.-led efforts. On the Arab side, only low-level delegations were sent to the tenth anniversary celebration of Kuwait's liberation and the event was not celebrated outside of Kuwait itself.(6)

--As sanctions weakened, Iraq reemerged both on the Arab political scene and in terms of successfully circumventing the sanctions. Thus, by the tenth anniversary of the war, President Saddam Hussein remained relatively unscathed and on the verge of a comeback.

--Within non-Arab Iran, too, hopes for reform largely failed. President Muhammad Khatami, though elected by a large margin and given a big parliamentary majority, proved unwilling or incapable of leading a domestic movement for actual change. And Iran's foreign policy remained as it had been before, supporting subversive and armed movements, as well as building long-range missiles and nuclear weapons.(7)

Thus, moderate regimes did not become more moderate; radical regimes remained hardline and grew in relative strength. Reform efforts failed, the Arab-Israeli peace process fell apart. The United States was unable to use its sole superpower status to win any longer-term gains, though the restriction of Iranian and Iraqi power during the 1990s was a real achievement.

Of course, the achievements of the postwar decade should not be neglected. Kuwait gained real peace and sovereignty. The U.S. role in the Middle East in general, and the Gulf in particular, was strengthened. Gulf stability was put on a stronger footing. Israel and Jordan signed a peace treaty and the Arab-Israeli peace process was given its best chance in history, moving further from international conflict if not actually arriving at a negotiated solution.

Nevertheless, it could be said that much of the progress and change that had apparently followed the allied victory in 1991 had dissipated during the decade that followed.

Whether this was inevitable or not, and how this setback might have been avoided, is of course a matter for debate. It should be clear, though, that to attribute all these factors and more largely or solely to the failure to complete a final Israel-Palestinian peace agreement is highly erroneous, blocking any serious attempt to understand the region.

As a case study on these issues, let us first consider the issue of Gulf security, the situation closest to the Kuwait war's experience and lessons. The Gulf strategic situation is a triangle in which two stronger sides--Iran and Iraq--confront a weaker and richer third grouping, the Arab monarchies. These states, all members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), include: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman. Historically, the United States played a secondary and outside, but increasingly vital, balancing role.(8)

British protection of the Gulf monarchies ended with that country's withdrawal in 1971. During the 1970s, these kingdoms sought to preserve their security by appeasing radical Iraq. Iran's Islamic revolution came to power in February 1979, ushering in a new stage in which Iran was now the threat and the GCC saw Iraq as its protector. Iraq invaded Iran in 1979, seeing that state as both a threat eager to spread Islamist revolution and as a weak enemy that could be easily defeated. To protect themselves from Iran, the GCC states also asked the United States to convoy their oil tankers. They also bought huge amounts of weaponry from the United States, though their forces were still nowhere near able to protect themselves solely by their own efforts.

The war ended with a nominal Iraqi victory in 1988. But Iraq had suffered huge economic losses during the fighting. Both as compensation and reward, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein sought Arab leadership and loot from the GCC states. In 1990, he occupied Kuwait. The GCC states had to turn to the United States to save them, which it did as the head of a coalition during the 1991 war.

Looking over this history from the vantage point of 1991, the GCC states could draw some important lessons from their experience:

1. Despite the rhetoric of Arab brotherhood and anti-Americanism, the GCC states knew that other Arab countries were more likely to subvert than to protect them. Consequently, they showed little interest in schemes for Egyptian and Syrian forces to be present to ensure their security. Their proper goal was to promote their own sovereignty, national identity, individual interests, and economic progress.

2. Having spent many years appeasing Iran and Iraq at various times, only to see the guard dog turn into a wolf threatening to blow their houses down, the GCC states seemed to prefer that both countries be deterred. In short, they wanted both Iran and Iraq to be kept isolated and militarily weak. On the U.S. policy side, this strategy came to be called "dual containment."

3. In contrast to their long practice of keeping the United States at arms' length, the GCC states now viewed it as their protector, giving it unprecedented military access to the Gulf and to their own territory.(9)

These lessons from the Kuwait crisis and war largely governed GCC practices in the 1990s but eroded--at least points two and three--as the decade continued. It should be noted that the overwhelming majority of this decline took place during the period (1993-2000) when Arab-Israeli negotiations were generally progressing and hopes of an agreement were high.

The basis of this change, then, lay in local Gulf developments. Saddam Hussein still governed Iraq and defiantly rejected efforts to disarm or moderate him.(10) At the same time, the United States was unable to remove him or force him to change his policies. The international coalition that had defeated Iraq broke up, with Russia, France, and China taking the lead in rejecting tough action and urging a reduction in sanctions.

In this context, the bottom line was that the GCC states knew that Saddam Hussein would survive and continue to threaten them. Meanwhile, they did not want to rely completely on U.S. backing, since this proved ineffective in ousting Saddam and--they worried--might not continue forever. Their poor understanding of American interests and motives, as well as the way its policies were formulated, enhanced their suspicion.

Overriding any apparent contradiction to this point, however, they also knew that the United States would continue to help them no matter what they did. In other words, the amount of U.S. protection they could expect would remain unchanged even if the GCC states provided no help in advancing the Arab-Israeli peace process, refused to support tough action against Iraq, and moved toward appeasement of Iraq or Iran. In general, this proved to be a correct assessment.

At the same time, in contrast to U.S. policy, several GCC states, especially Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, saw Iran as a potential ally against Iraq. They also expected that easing relations with Tehran would reduce that country's threat to their security. Thus, the Saudis led in a successful campaign to improve GCC-Iran relations.(11)

In addition, fearing Saddam Hussein, the GCC states were unwilling to take stronger measures against him. With the partial exception of Kuwait, they accepted his reintegration into the Arab world. While public opinion played some role here, the main consideration was strategic. After all, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait remained most reluctant to remove sanctions on Iraq--facing the same basic structure of public opinion as the other GCC states--because their situation made them more vulnerable to his threat.

Still, the GCC states knew they would have to deal with Saddam Hussein's regime in the future and often saw no point in making it any angrier with them. They could enjoy the fruits of sanctions that weakened Iraq and U.S. protection while also trying to reduce Iraqi antagonism.

In a sense, then, the GCC response to the United States strategy of dual containment was increasingly what might be called "triple insurance," maximizing their potential backing (or reducing threats) from Iran, Iraq, and the United States whenever possible. Its three principles are:

--Improving relations with Iran so that it could balance Iraq.

--Appeasing or not antagonizing Iraq to reduce the likelihood that it would become an immediate threat.

--Seeking U.S. protection to keep both Iran and Iraq weak, while also deterring them from intimidating or attacking.(12)

Thus, a decade after the Gulf war, the old strategic triangle had reappeared. The GCC states relied on U.S. protection in addition to--rather than instead of--a policy including appeasement of both Iran and Iraq, while trying to use Iran to counterweigh Iraq. Rather than irreversibly changing the nature of Gulf strategic relations, the Kuwait crisis and war had opened another transient era within that framework. It had a temporary impact in most respects, though it also had a long-range effect in increasing both GCC mistrust of Iraq and dependence on U.S. help.

This basic model fits other aspects of the region as well. The events of 1990-1991 had a real effect on the area but did not bring about as much change as might have been expected earlier. Traditional models, though modified, reasserted themselves.

Each issue, of course, has a different history and interpretation. Following is a brief discussion of potential patterns and lessons emerging from the Kuwait crisis and their fate during the ensuing decade.

PAN-ARAB ALLEGIANCES VERSUS LEGITIMACY FOR INDIVIDUAL NATION-STATES

It could be argued that the 1990-1991 crisis demonstrated the dangers of Pan-Arab nationalism to Arab rulers. After all, this ideology was used by Saddam to legitimate his seizure of Kuwait as well as his broader ambition to subvert or subordinate all other Arab states. Millions of people throughout the Arab world accepted Saddam's claims to regional leadership and supported his seizure of Kuwait. This attitude was understandable. After all, if Arab countries should be cooperate as closely as possible and even be united into one state--an idea that achieved near official status, at least in public, throughout the Arab world--Iraq's action was a proper and patriotic (in Pan-Arab terms) step.

In short, it became apparent that pan-Arab nationalism furnished a popular ideological cover for nation-state imperialism. By accepting and promoting such concepts, other Arab states and leaders were undermining their own freedom of action and even sovereignty. History had shown this political framework to be a formula for instability, mutual subversion, intervention, and conflict. At the same time, it had inhibited the development of democracy as well as economic or social development.

Consequently, during the 1990s it seemed as if Arab governments were acting more individualistically than ever before: forming alliances with the United States, moving toward peace with Israel, and pursuing other policies as it suited their interests. The fact that the moderate states no longer feared their radical neighbors also widened their freedom of actions.

By the turn of the millennium, however, the situation was returning to a status closer to its historic patterns. The return of Iraq to the Arab fold, the lack of criticism for Syria's continued occupation of Lebanon, Arab willingness to subordinate their strategy to the decisions of Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat, and other such moves showed the enduring appeal of Arab solidarity.

It should be emphasized that this process remained more verbal than practical.

There was some increased wariness of Arab states toward their "brothers" and a far greater reluctance to take risks on their behalf than in earlier decades. For example, solidarity with the Palestinians evoked no specific governmental activities, not even financial contributions to their cause. Similarly, the GCC countries were not going to abandon their stronger connections with the United States. In Egypt and Jordan, peace with Israel as a policy--though not as an acceptable norm for the public and media--were accepted.

Still, the ideological constraints on individual states remained roughly--though arguably somewhat less--strong than they had been in the pre-1990 years. While this could be attributed to public opinion, or the Arab "street," the fact was that this was a useful tool for governmental control and national solidarity. A country could be filled with impoverished people, plagued by corruption and government inefficiency, mired in undemocratic practices, and so on, but all these issues would disappear in an orchestrated passion on the Palestinian question. This is not to say that the emotional factor was not there, but it was no accident that this was the only issue where government "felt" itself required to "yield" to public sentiment. And that same sentiment was constantly fostered by the state-controlled media, educational system, officials' statements, etc., to a fever pitch. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that this is virtually the sole issue on which the public or media is permitted to speak at all.

Implicitly, despite this persistent focal point, there was a long-term trend toward nation-state patriotism. By the year 2000, almost all the Arab states had around a half-century history of independence. They had built up their own economic and political patterns though culture--given the shared Arabic language--tended to flow more easily across borders. Each state, too, had its own geopolitical situation, allies, and enemies. Still, the differentiation among them remained more implicit than explicit, at least in terms of constraints on their foreign policy behavior.

Of course, nation-state self-interest had also been a major factor in Iraq's seizure of Kuwait. Saddam Hussein's goal was, after all, to strengthen Iraq, unite the country's communities--the Kurds and Shia--which were less enthusiastic about his rule and to provide its citizens with additional resources. Kuwait's resistance also drew from a sense of national self-assertion against an invader and brutal occupier. Still, in the Arab world a decade after the Kuwait war, nation-state patriotism was the political sentiment that dare not speak its name.

DOMESTIC POLITICS: MODERATION, DEVELOPMENTALISM, DEMOCRACY

Did the Kuwait crisis and war suggest the need for domestic changes in Arab states? Cumulatively, the half-century culminating in the 1991 debacle had been a very bad era for Arab peoples and polities. A mere list of the problems and failures during these years would require several pages. The Arab countries had lagged behind many others in the pace of their economic development and social progress. They were, as a group, less democratic and more repressive. Few, if any, of their basic foreign policy goals had been achieved.

Consequently, a key question in evaluating this process is on whom to place the blame for all these shortcomings. Externalizing the Arab world's problems--to attribute them to American (or Western) imperialism, Zionism, and local traitors serving these enemies--prevented the kind of reappraisal necessary to fix the internal factors at the root of the problems and catastrophes. Lacking such a real shift--and despite the fact that the political systems and ideologies had failed--meant that the domestic and international situations would not be solved or resolved.

The great majority of leaders, scholars, and journalists in both the West and the Middle East expressed real hope that such a process might happen in the aftermath of the Kuwait crisis. Perhaps an alternative model of thought and policy was possible. If

the Soviet bloc had once provided a political and economic example for some Arab states, these mentors had now clearly failed on their own terms. Aside from the factor of massive oil income, progress or success was visibly lacking for the Arab world. It had not defeated or destroyed enemies, who seemed to grow stronger over time.

How would the Kuwaitis and Gulf Arabs generally maintain their support for an Arab nationalism which had almost destroyed their independence? Why would countries cling to systems that had failed so badly to redeem their promises except for their ability to keep incumbent governments in power? When much of the rest of the world was moving to democracy would the Arab world remain bogged down in dictatorships that were repressive at home and waged ruinous wars or continued confrontations abroad? Would anti-Americanism remain so deep and bitter when the United States had saved the Arab world from Iraq? Could the Palestinians sustain a half-century-long struggle in which they had derived no state for themselves and had failed to destroy Israel?

Yet ten years after the Kuwait war's end, it was hard to see any major changes in how a single Arab state was being governed compared to the situation in 1990 or even in 1980, 1970, or 1960. There was no significant advance toward democracy anywhere, despite some small gains in the Gulf Arab states. Civil society remained extremely weak, with governments continuing to control or repress independent voices. Even the public debate over these issues was still quite staid compared to everywhere else in the world.

This is a remarkable outcome, even though it is generally taken for granted. Political systems that don't work very well or fail to achieve their goals may be expected to be subject to change or at least to serious challenge. Policy premises that do not accord with external realities, thus producing real international failures, might be corrected or at least carefully reexamined.

Of course, the explanation is partly that the systems do function adequately in terms of keeping rulers in power and to maintain internal order. Not a single coup or real regime change took place in the Arab world between 1990 and 2000 or, indeed, from 1980 either, with the exception of the peripheral states of Yemen and Sudan.(13) Moreover, the basic political concepts shaping Arab politics remain fundamentally popular, though this might in part be attributed to their reinforcement in state-controlled media and educational systems.

The picture, then, of a repugnant and repressive Iraqi dictatorship failing to meet its people's needs, launching invasions of neighbors and generally disrupting the regional system--a view held in the West--has not become an effective political factor in promoting change in the Middle East. The same result holds for democratic and economic reforms prevailing in many areas elsewhere in the world. Some, but surprisingly little, debate of this kind emerged in the aftermath of the Kuwait crisis and war.

FOREIGN POLICY STRATEGY

In thinking about foreign policy within the region, there are several issues put into a different light by the Kuwait crisis. One of these questions, Gulf security, has already been discussed as a case study, above. Other critical points affected by this event include the attitude of states toward Iraq; Israel and the Arab-Israeli peace process; and Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD).

Attitude toward Iraq

Why did the sense of threat from Iraq among many Arab states--though far less so for Saudi Arabia and Kuwait--fade over time despite the fact that the same leadership holding the same ambitions continued to rule there? There are many different reasons for this trend.

To some extent, of course, such a process is natural and inevitable. Yesterday's enemy may have strategic uses at a different time. New issues and problems crowd out older concerns or at least reduce them to a lower priority. Sustaining the same policy for even a decade can itself be seen as an

impressive consistency. The foregoing of economic advantage to maintain the sanctions, the increased granting of basing facilities to the United States, and Jordan's decision to receive leading Iraqi defectors--despite threats from Saddam Hussein--are all examples of Arab steadfastness in continuing to support the anti-Iraq coalition.

Other factors include the fact that Iraq's defeat and continued military weakness made it seem far less threatening. At the same time, if Iraq were to be too hard-pressed and collapsed this outcome would have certain geostrategic disadvantages for some Arab states as well as furnishing a dangerous precedent for their own survival as regimes and as countries.

Moreover, since they understood that the United States would stand guard over them against any Iraqi threat and do the unpleasant work of containing Baghdad regardless of their own behavior, Arab governments knew they would lose nothing by giving rhetorical comfort to that regime. Moves by Gulf Arab monarchies toward detente with Iran were also steps toward trying to find an ally that would help preserve their sovereignty and deter any Iraqi aggression.

Equally, since the United States could not overthrow Iraq's ruler and conceivably might fail to protect them from him in the future, Arab leaders also wanted to avoid antagonizing Saddam too much lest he take revenge on them some day. The Iraqi leadership carefully promoted this fear in order to encourage a return to past appeasement policies by Gulf Arab states, Jordan, and others.

In addition, several countries--notably Jordan and Syria--gained economically to an enormous extent by bypassing the sanctions. Iraq was determined to make such behavior worthwhile for them in terms of commercial benefits and low-cost oil.

While domestic public opinion also affected Arab governments, it was only in the framework of reinforcing all the points listed above. Factors here included feelings of Arab brotherhood, sympathy for the suffering of the Iraqi people (and not necessarily support for the regime), reassertion of familiar attitudes, anger at outsiders seen as victimizing Arabs.

The idea that Iraq might be helpful in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict was only one point among many in setting this trend. And even with all these factors, the movement toward rapprochement between the Arab world and Iraq was still slow and limited. It still took almost a decade to readmit Iraq to the top level of Arab League activity during the year 2000. And it was China, France, and Russia--and not Arab states--which took the lead in the anti-sanctions campaign.

At the same time, and despite the fact that Egypt, Jordan, and Syria took a friendlier attitude toward Iraq's demands for an end to all sanctions, not all Arab states were ready to forgive Iraq for its past behavior. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait continued to insist that Baghdad must fulfill all UN resolutions before sanctions should be lifted. Indeed, this factor remained powerful. At the March 2001 Arab summit, for example, the Kuwaitis stood firm. The sanctions should end, they argued with support from the Saudis, only if Iraq promised not to threaten Kuwait again and if it adhered to UN resolutions rectifying its behavior.

In short, the lesson that Iraq was a major threat receded somewhat into the background but was by no means forgotten by other Arab states, especially those that faced the greatest risk from Baghdad's future behavior.

Attitude toward Israel, the Palestinians, and the Arab-Israeli Conflict

The Kuwait crisis and war also prompted, albeit along the lines of preexisting trends, some Arab rethinking about Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict. With Iraq (as well as radical Islamist movements and Iran) as such a clear and present danger to the survival of Arab regimes, it was harder to claim that Israel was the principal threat.

Moreover, the conflict with Israel seemed more and more like a situation that

created a dangerous permanent atmosphere of crisis; could draw Arab countries into costly, losing wars; provided a rationale for dictatorship; justified counterproductive economic or social policies; and inhibited necessary cooperation with the United States. Thus, rather than serving the interests of Arab countries (or in some cases, regimes), continuing this unwinnable battle was endangering their survival as well as progress.

Aside from the Palestinians, and especially after 1973, few Arab rulers were eager to fight Israel and they were not required to do so. While this policy of no war/no peace helped Arab politicians survive, it also inhibited progress and opened the region to enormous dangers. If extremism in the pursuit of Arab rights was no vice and moderation in the face of an allegedly evil Israel was no virtue, the resulting atmosphere fostered revolutionary Islamic movements, expensive arms races, catastrophic civil wars, and an Iraqi dictator invading your country.

Nonetheless, a series of events slowly and consistently chipped away at the Arab political and ideological system, making it seemingly hard to sustain a belief in pan-Arab nationalism or even the likelihood of Arab unity, the destruction of Israel, and a triumph over the West. The 1967 and 1973 military defeats by Israel were followed by Lebanon's vicious twenty-year civil war, starting in 1974, Egypt's defection from the anti-Israel camp in the late 1970s, Iran's 1979 revolution, and the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War.

The year 1982 alone saw a triple disaster. The Syrian army massacred thousands of civilians in Hama, showing the hollowness of the radical regimes' populist, progressive rhetoric. Iranian troops crossed into Iraq for the first time, pointing up the genuine threat of Persian power and radical fundamentalism to Arab regimes. Israel's army went into Lebanon and defeated the PLO and Syrian forces, thereby showing Israel's continued military superiority, the Soviet and Arab states' unwillingness or inability to respond, and the readiness of some Arabs to ally themselves with Israel.

The 1980s brought much more bad news about Arab failures, defeats, and divisions. Israel not only remained strong but huge numbers of immigrants from the Soviet Union and expanding settlements on the West Bank seemed to show that time was not on the Arabs' side. In contrast, Moscow's power continued to decline and collapsed completely in 1991. Radical Arab regimes, even those possessing huge oil reserves, were unable to show economic progress. The reality of individual Arab nation-states--each with its own interests, which had once seemed much less real than the pan-Arab aspiration--had become undeniable.

Nevertheless, so great was the old system's staying power that Saddam Hussein, the newest incarnation of the old order, was still the 1990 Arab summit's hero. But not only did he fail to deliver on his promise of Arab victory and resurgence, he also graphically showed that the price of alleged glory would be more wars, defeats, and perhaps political suicide for other Arabs. His adventure showed once more--perhaps, but not definitively, for the last time--that the most dangerous of men to the Arabs was he who actually believed and tried to implement their slogans.

There were many in the Arab world, then, who argued that the conflict with Israel was obsolete and that a compromise negotiated peace was preferable. This atmosphere was sustained to a greater or lesser degree through the 1991 Madrid conference, through the 1993 Oslo agreement and for a seven-year peace process. At the critical moment when agreement was closest, however, the decision of Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat not to make peace with Israel in 2000 and his launching of a new uprising instead, set off a new era which appeared to move the region back into the pre-1990 era. Old attitudes and rhetoric quickly reappeared. And if Arab states talked far more toughly than they acted, this too had usually been true from the mid-1970s onward.

In sharp contrast, it had seemed in the aftermath of the 1991 war that the old ways could no longer continue for the Arab system

amidst a growing sense of the conflict's futility and wastefulness. Individual Arab states showed increasing readiness to seek their own interests. At the least, Arab states were walking away from the conflict. At most, they were ready to make peace and try to turn it to their advantage. The Madrid conference of 1991, itself a product of the Kuwait crisis, was the beginning of the most promising peace process in a half-century of the Arab-Israeli conflict, including a Jordan-Israel peace treaty.

Some of these same criteria had seemed to apply to the Palestinians. In 1991 they were at the low point of their fortunes. Their own intifada had petered out and their hero, Saddam Hussein, had been defeated. Their ally, the USSR and its Soviet bloc, had collapsed. Arab states were less interested in helping them. Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, angry at the PLO's support for Saddam Hussein, cut off aid, producing a financial crisis as well as the expulsion of about 300,000 Palestinians from Kuwait.

Around 350,000 Palestinian refugees had fled Iraq or been forced out of Kuwait. The United States, which the PLO had usually viewed as its arch-enemy, was the world's sole superpower. Israel appeared stronger than ever. If ever there was a time for the Palestinians to make a compromise peace, recognizing that they could not achieve their maximal goals, the 1990s offered that opportunity.

The history of the ensuing Syria-Israel and Palestinian-Israel peace processes is very complex. Jordan did make full peace with Israel and several other Arab states took steps in that direction. But from the standpoint of a decade after the Kuwait war, the two main Arab protagonists were unable to reach an agreement with Israel, even after Israel offered to meet virtually all their demands. Arguably, this failure on the Arab side was due to weak leadership, afraid to make tough decisions and unable or incapable of altering public opinion; an inability to break with the past, overwhelming suspicion of Israel; and a range of other factors.

The bottom line was that the Palestinians and Syrians proved unable to meet the challenge of achieving a compromise peace with Israel--albeit on good terms for themselves--and the Arab world would not shake lose from their veto power in ending the conflict. At the same time, though, the Kuwait crisis marked a turning point after which Arab state support for the Palestinians--aside from the purely verbal level--reached an all-time low.

The Kuwait crisis had provided an opportunity to end the conflict--by strengthening the United States, weakening the radical Arab forces, and showing that the traditional Arab policy led to very dangerous results for the Arabs themselves. The crisis probably did diminish the conflict considerably but the final breakthrough remained beyond reach.

Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD)

During the Kuwait war, Iraq fired missiles at both Israel and Saudi Arabia. The threat of Iraq's potential use of WMD--along with its drives to obtain nuclear bombs, chemical and biological capabilities--made the Arab world more aware than ever of these new weapons. If the Gulf Arab states perceived a heightened threat, they would have to consider new ways of defending themselves. The war also brought to the fore the question of missile defense.

Nevertheless, different Arab states had a variety of responses to this new strategic environment. Gulf Arab monarchies purchased state-of-the-art air forces, Egypt pursued a more traditional arms build-up, while Syria failed to find funding for major arms purchases. In general, though, there was no progress on missile defense, though the Saudis and Kuwaitis continued to field Patriot systems. Regarding WMD, Iraq was stymied by international sanctions and inspections, though it sought to continue such programs whenever possible. Other Arab states decided not to launch crash programs to obtain nuclear weapons. Most money, though Syria did have impressive missile forces, went into conventional weapons.(14)

In general, there was no "peace dividend" from the Kuwait crisis. On the contrary, the war showed the heightened need for military forces. In this sense, the Kuwait conflict had the opposite impact on the Arab world (and the Middle East in general) that the simultaneous Cold War's end had for the West.

VIEWS OF THE UNITED STATES

America's role and influence as the world's sole superpower was recognized and further consolidated in the Kuwait crisis.(15) Thereafter, moderate Arab states continued efforts to maintain good relations with the United States and to use it as a protector, no matter how their public posture differed from that image. Even Syria tried to give the impression that it was showing cooperation with U.S. efforts to further the Arab-Israeli peace process. The PLO, at least in its form as the Palestinian Authority (PA) governing the West Bank and Gaza, became a virtual American client. And after a long struggle involving U.S. sanctions, Libya surrendered two intelligence agents for trial in the bombing of a U.S. airliner over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988.

Only Iraq remained openly defiant of the United States. Yet while sanctions remained, Baghdad did not suffer greatly for that response. Sanctions remained but were steadily weakened. The Gulf war coalition broke up, with France, Russia, and China leading the way in opposing the tough U.S. strategy on Iraq. The United States launched limited bombing raids, maintained no-fly zones, and preserved the Kurdish autonomous area in the north.

What was most noticeable and notable were the limits on U.S. power and influence, which could be attributed either to mistaken U.S. policies or the nature of the regimes, its problems, and its regimes. The United States was unable to press the PA or Syria into signing peace agreements with Israel, despite that country's many offers of concessions on almost all the key points. Equally, it could not keep some countries from breaking the sanctions on Iraq or the U.S.-imposed sanctions on Iran. The United States had very little success in persuading other Arab states to move closer to peace with Israel, especially Saudi Arabia and Iran, which it had saved during the 1991 crisis.

While there are frequent complaints from the Arab world that the United States is a bully, the prevailing attitude seems to ensure that such a splendid bully is on one's own side. Moreover, there is ample reason to argue that American failures came about not because it was perceived as a bully but because it did not use its influence powerfully and effectively.

Why should various Arabs show gratitude to the United States as their protector and liberator when they didn't have to do so in order to obtain the benefits? Indeed, there were interesting countervailing factors on this point. To indicate dependency and appreciation for American help would bring U.S. demands for reciprocal behavior. Moreover, in the context of their world view, Arab leaders feared that the United States might seek to control the Gulf, or the Middle East in general, subordinating them in an imperial manner.

In short, while U.S. power was predominant and Gulf Arab states were ready to grant Washington a more important role than ever in protecting Gulf security, the gains made during the decade fell far short of earlier expectations. The apparent lesson in the Arab world from the Kuwait crisis was that the United States could be more helpful but they could avoid paying much of a price for that assistance.

At the same time, Arab states in the Gulf were less afraid of U.S. involvement and intervention than they had ever been before. They were very much aware that the United States was their source of arms and protector, which often exercised influence on their behalf.

It might seem, then, that the lessons from the Kuwait crisis remain more limited than they appeared to be in earlier years. The rhetoric of the largely state-controlled media as well as of the general public seems relatively close to the pre-crisis norms. One

could argue that the experience's memory and impact--like others in life and politics--have worn down or worn out over time. Yet at the same time, lessons and opportunities available from the experience of 1990-1991 have been neglected, making it possible that such events might be repeated in future.

Another, not uncomplimentary, perspective, is that Arab leaders have learned more than they like to say. One key lesson of Middle Eastern politics for them had long been not to talk explicitly about their conclusions. There continues to be a distinction between the principles by which they live and act, and public expression. The danger, of course, is that public expression can once again become dominant in the creation of new crises.

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NOTES

1. These issues are discussed at greater length in Barry Rubin, Cauldron of Turmoil: America in the Middle East, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1992 and in the author's "The Kuwait Crisis, 1990," in Ami Ayalon, Middle East Contemporary Survey, 1990, Volume 14, (NY, 1991). It is interesting to note that this fear of another state's militancy winning internal support was also a key factor in Iraq's own decision to invade Iran a decade earlier.
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3. See Barry Rubin and Thomas Keaney, The Armed Forces in the Contemporary Middle East (Frank Cass, 2001) and Barry Rubin, "The Military in Contemporary Middle Eastern Politics," MERIA Journal, Vol. 5, Number 1 (March 2001).
4. Yosef Ben-Aharon, "Negotiating With Syria: A First-Hand Account, MERIA Journal, Vol. 4 No. 2 (June 2000); Barry Rubin, "Understanding Syrian Policy: An Analysis of Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shara's Explanation," MERIA Journal, Vol. 4 No. 2 (June 2000); Eyal Zisser, "Decisionmaking in Asad's Syria," MERIA Journal, Vol. 2. No. 2 (May 1998).
5. Robert O. Freedman, "Russia and the Middle East: The Primakov Era," MERIA Journal, Vol. 2 No. 2 (May 1998); Robert O. Freedman, "Russian-Iranian Relations in the 1990s," MERIA Journal, Vol. 4 No. 2 (June 2000); Oksana Antonenko, "Russia's Military Involvement in the Middle East" MERIA Journal Vol. 5, No. 1 (March 2001).
6. Barry Rubin, The Region at the Center of the World: Crises and Quandaries in the Contemporary Persian Gulf, (London: Frank Cass, 2001).
7. A.W. Samii, "The Contemporary Iranian News Media, 1998-1999," MERIA Journal, Vol. 3, No. 4 (December 1999); A.W. Samii. "Iran's 2000 Election," MERIA Journal, Vol. 4, No. 1 (March 2000)
8. Barry Rubin, "The Persian Gulf After the Cold War: Old Pattern, New Era," MERIA Journal, Vol. 3, No. 2 (June 1999)
9. On GCC security policy and relations with the United States, see Jon B. Alterman, "The Gulf States and the American Umbrella," MERIA Journal Vol. 4, No. 4 (December 2000); Joseph Kostiner, "The United States and the Gulf States: Alliance in Need," MERIA Journal, Vol. 2, No. 4 (December 1998); Joshua Teitelbaum, "The Gulf States and Dual Containment," MERIA Journal,

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10. Amatzia Baram, "Saddam Husayn: Between his Power Base and the International Community," MERIA Journal, Vol. 4, No. 4 (December 2000); Laurie Mylroie, "Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction and the 1997 Gulf Crisis," MERIA Journal, Vol. 1, No. 4 (December 1997); Kenneth M. Pollack, "Current Iraqi Military Capabilities," Meria News, 1998/No. 4 (February 1998).

11. Teitelbaum, op. cit.

12. For assessments of Iran's power and politics, see Michael Eisenstadt, "The Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran: An Assessment," MERIA Journal, Vol. 5, No. 1 (March 2001); Seth Carus, "Iran and Weapons of Mass Destruction," MERIA Journal, Vol. 4, No. 3 (September 2000).

13. On stability in the GCC states, see Daniel L. Byman and Jerrold D. Green, "The Enigma of Political Stability in the Persian Gulf Monarchies," MERIA Journal, Vol. 3, No. 3 (September 1999); Daryl Champion, "The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Elements of Instability with Stability," MERIA Journal, Vol. 3, No. 4 (December 1999).

14. For an evaluation of the threat from WMD, see George Tenet, "Weapons of Mass Destruction: A New Dimension in U.S. Middle East Policy," MERIA Journal, Vol. 4, No. 2 (June 2000).

15. On U.S. policy during this period, see Jon B. Alterman, "The Gulf States and the American Umbrella," MERIA Journal, Vol. 4, No. 4 (December 2000); Michael Eisenstadt, "U.S. Military Capabilities in the Post-Cold War Era: Implications for Middle East Allies," MERIA Journal, Vol. 2, No. 4 (December 1998); Robert O. Freedman, "U.S. Middle East Policy in the Second Clinton Administration," MERIA Journal, Vol. 3, No. 1 (February 1999); Robert J. Lieber, "U.S. Middle East Policy in The Clinton Second Term," MERIA Journal, Vol. 1, No. 1 (January 1997); Barry Rubin, "U.S. Foreign Policy and Rogue States," MERIA Journal, Vol. 3, No. 3 (September 1999); Amin Tarzi, "Contradictions of U.S. Policy on Iraq and its Consequences," MERIA Journal, Vol. 4, No. 1 (March 2000).