

THE KUWAITI CRISIS AND IRANIAN RESPONSE

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Iraq invaded Kuwait on 2nd August 1990 and by the end of the month it had completely absorbed Kuwait into its administrative structure despite international condemnation of the invasion. Shortly thereafter US troops backed by forces from various countries were quickly dispatched to Saudi Arabia to protect the Kingdom from Iraqi assault and to impress upon President Saddam Hussein that he should withdraw from Kuwait. The invasion and the subsequent entry of US forces into Saudi Arabia had a massive impact on the regional politics, causing alliances to shift and crumble. This article will examine the Iranian policy towards the Kuwaiti crisis and an attempt will also be made to analyse the Iranian behaviour in the light of the country's foreign policy perspective.

The Border Conflict between Iraq and Kuwait

Iraqi irredentist claims over Kuwait go back to the late 1930s when the second Iraqi monarch, King Ghazi, raised the possibility of Iraq intervening in Kuwait and incorporating it.[1] However, relations between the two countries remained normal and cordial as the monarchies in both countries were created and sustained by Britain, which kept things under control due to its massive presence in the Gulf.

Relations between the two countries started deteriorating with the overthrow of monarchy in Iraq in July 1958. Two years later, when the British granted independence to Kuwait, Prime Minister Qassem claimed Kuwait to be a part of the Basra province. Alarmed by the Iraqi stance, the Kuwaiti Emir appealed for British military help under the Treaty of Friendship and Mutual Consolation signed in June 1961. The British immediately responded by sending 6,000 troops to defend the nascent city-state[2]. With the overthrow of Qassem in February 1963, a new chapter opened in Iraqi-Kuwait relationship. The new Iraqi ruler, Abdul Salam Arif, recognised Kuwait's independence and both countries exchanged ambassadors shortly thereafter. Simultaneously, Iraq-Kuwait joint committee was set up to look into the problem of border demarcation[3].

With the emergence of a Baathist government in Iraq in 1968, relations between the two countries began to deteriorate gradually. In late 1969, Baghdad asked for permission from Kuwait to station Iraqi forces near Bubiyan to safeguard Umm Qasr port from any possible Iranian attack. Kuwait rejected the Iraqi demand, whereupon, Baghdad resorted to pressure tactic and began amassing troops near the Kuwaiti border. Tension mounted and in early 1973 border skirmishes led to casualties on both sides[4]. Meanwhile, border demarcation-talks were resumed with Iraq reiterating its demand that Bubiyan and Warba be ceded or leased to it for defence purpose. The Kuwaitis turned down the Iraqi demand and the controversy persisted throughout the 1970s. One

important reason for the Kuwaiti refusal was their apprehension of Iranian reaction. Were Kuwait to cede the two islands, the Shah of Iran who wanted to be the policemen of the Gulf, would have been antagonised. Were Iraq to acquire these islands, its ability to confront or challenge Tehran would certainly have been strengthened.

During the decade-long Iran-Iraq war, pressure mounted on Kuwait to cede the two islands to Baghdad. During the initial stages of the war Kuwait maintained a neutral stance but as the war dragged on Kuwait increasingly sided with Iraq. Its support incensed Tehran and the latter bombed Kuwait several times for its role in channeling supplies to Baghdad. Faced with the Iranian threat, Kuwait signed a secret agreement with Iraq in 1984, whereby, Iraqi troops were allowed the use of the two islands for security purpose[5].

Convinced that by providing financial and other support to Iraq during the Gulf war, it had earned its goodwill, Kuwait sent a high-level delegation to Baghdad led by Crown Prince Sheikh Saad Abdullah, soon after the 1988 cease-fire, in order to resolve the border question once and for all. But to their utter shock the Kuwaitis found that the Iraqi position with regard to border demarcation instead of softening, had further hardened.

Although Baghdad had the upper hand at the time of cease-fire negotiations, the Iraqi economy was in shambles. Iraq had incurred a huge foreign debt and was spending a large part of its scarce resources on maintaining a huge military machine built up during the war years[6]. The sharp fall in oil prices further aggravated Iraqi economic problems. At a time when Iraq needed revenues, the fall in oil prices was a terrible blow to Saddam Hussein. In this regard, Kuwait earned the ire of Baghdad because Kuwait had become one of the most frequent violators of OPEC quotas[7].

Baghdad accused Kuwait of deliberately harming Iraq's economy by exceeding OPEC oil quotas and reducing its oil revenues by 89 billion between 1981-90. A reduction of one dollar in the price of a barrel of oil, according to Iraq, resulted in a loss of over a billion-dollar for Iraq annually. Apart from this, Iraq also accused Kuwait of stealing Iraqi oil since 1980 from the southern section of the Rumaylah oil field and dumping the oil in the international oil market[8]. Following this Iraqi complaint the Gulf oil ministers met in Jeddah in July wherein Kuwait, taken aback by the Iraqi accusation, pledged to adhere to the OPEC quota. Not content with this assurance, Baghdad renewed its verbal attacks on Kuwait. In July 1990 Saddam Hussein threatened military action if Kuwait failed to abide by OPEC quotas.

Invasion and its Immediate Aftermath

In late July 1990, Iraqi troops began amassing near the border with Kuwait. On 25 July Saddam told the US Ambassador Glaspie that he was in dire need of money and that an invasion on Kuwait cannot be rule out. Glaspie is recorded as saying that the US had no position on the Kuwaiti border question, and that the Americans understand Iraq's desire to increase oil revenue[9]. On 2 August in a dramatic military operation, some 100,000 Iraqi troops with 300 tanks overran Kuwait in matter of hours.

At the time of the Iraqi invasion, the Arab League Foreign Ministers had already assembled in Cairo as part of a meeting of the OIC. On 3 August, the ministers denounced Iraq's invasion, called

for immediate and unconditional withdrawal and asserted their commitment to preserve the sovereignty and territorial integrity of member states of the Arab League. The foreign ministers opposed foreign intervention in the crisis but they also rejected Kuwait's demand to form a joint Arab force to counter Iraq's army. The vote of condemnation at the Foreign Ministers' meet was significant. Fourteen states including Syria voted affirmatively while five abstained (Jordan, Mauritania, PLO, Sudan and Yemen). Iraq was ineligible to vote and the Libyans withdrew on their government's instruction. The failure of the foreign ministers to call up an Arab force led the ministers from the GCC countries to issue a separate statement wherein it was claimed that the clause, which rejected foreign intervention did not apply to adherence to collective international measures endorsed by the UN, since the Arab League Charter commits members to UN resolutions. This GCC addendum opened the doors to Kuwaiti and Saudi Arabian request for US military support.

By the time the emergency Arab Summit was convened in Cairo on 10 August, inter-Arab differences had escalated. Saddam Hussein had formally annexed Kuwait to Iraq two days earlier, just after President Bush had sent ground forces to Saudi Arabia. Iraq wanted the summit to focus on the inadmissibility foreign forces operating on Arab land. Jordan, Libya, PLO and Yemen urged the Arab leaders to form a mediation team that would attempt to reconcile the parties without condemning Iraq and that might facilitate the establishment of an Arab peace-keeping force to separate them during negotiations. The GCC member states rejected Iraq's stand as an effort to divert attention from the cause of the crisis. They also decided the proposal for mediation as a move that would delay action and help Iraq consolidate its position. Due to stiff opposition, the proposal was never put to vote. The summit finally passed a resolution, which supported GCC steps to implement the right of legitimate defence and agreed to dispatch Arab forces to support the GCC in the defence of their territories...against any foreign aggression[10].

While the Arab world was split down the middle over Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the GCC was working overtime to put into place an anti-Iraqi coalition, in mid-August Saddam Hussein abruptly sought an immediate formal peace with Iran by unconditionally accepting all Iranian claims since the declaration of cease-fire including the reinstatement of the Algiers Treaty of 1975. It was obvious that these concessions were dictated by expediency since Iraq wanted to move troops from its borders with Iran to Kuwait. Nonetheless, Iran accepted the Iraqi offer though it insisted that the issue of peace with Iraq was separate and had nothing to do with the Iraqi annexation of Kuwait. On 18 August Iraq began to withdraw troops from the central border areas of Ilam, Meymak and Mehran and nearly 80,000 prisoners of war were exchanged. On 11 September Iran and Iraq reestablished diplomatic relations[11].

The Iranian Stand

While Tehran welcomed Saddam Hussein's offer of formal settlement of the Iran-Iraq war, it unequivocally condemned Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and offered to defend the other Gulf States from Iraqi aggression. Iran declared that it would adhere to the economic sanction imposed on Iraq by the UN for the entire duration of the conflict. It was reported that Iraq tried to persuade Tehran to trade oil for food but the latter refused and agreed to provide only humanitarian assistance in the form of medicines and baby food. In fact, Iran's UN envoy, Kamal Kharrazi, went out of his way to underline Iranian compliance with the UN resolutions. He said that no Iraqi oil had been

exported via Iran and that his government had arrested 430 persons involved in smuggling food to Iraq'[12].

As the deployment of multinational forces in Saudi Arabia gathered momentum, a perceptible shift in Iran's Islamic revolutionary ideology could be discerned. In stark contrast to its earlier insistence on keeping the Gulf out of bounds for foreign powers, the Iranian President Rafsanjani almost came round to accepting it as a necessary evil in this particular case. Delivering a Friday sermon he said: "We have no objection to them (the multinational forces) obstructing aggression; anybody may help in anyway. However, it would have been better if the regional countries would have done so". Another departure from its position of one indivisible Ummah and artificiality of nation-state was the concern at the alteration of the political map of the Gulf due to Iraqi annexation of Kuwait. Rafsanjani opposed any alteration in the territorial map of the region. He said: "If Kuwait were to go ahead and cede Bubiyan to Saddam all the same we would act within our means to stop it." [14]

The wooing of Iran by Saddam Hussein produced extreme concern in the GCC. The latter too began to make overtures towards Tehran in a bid to win Iran's sympathy if not outright support. On 22 August 1990, the Kuwaiti foreign minister, Sheikh Sabah, arrived in Tehran and held talks with his Iranian counterpart Mr. Velayati. He expressed his regrets over 'past mistakes' of his Emirate, which Tehran accepted [15]. Shortly thereafter, on 4 September, UAE's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs arrived in Tehran with a message from Sheikh Zayed to Rafsanjani. The latter reiterated the need for greater cooperation between Iran and GCC and said Iran was ready to help in resolving the crisis. This came as a relief to the GCC because at that time there were constant rumours of Iran violating UN sanctions against Iraq [16]. Close on the heels of UAE's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs visit to Tehran, the Omani Minister of State for Foreign Affairs arrived in Iran. Practical cooperation between the GCC and Iran was discussed between him and Velayati [17]. The next visitor was Kuwaiti Deputy Foreign Minister who held extensive talks with Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister. Iran made it clear that without its presence no regional security arrangement was either feasible or complete. In line with its stated stand, Iran emphasized the need to form a politico-military structure by the GCC countries themselves, which would guarantee regional stability and security of the oil fields. The Kuwaiti Minister told Iran that the GCC states were keen to have Iran's participation in regional security set-up, which would include western powers also. They also wanted Iran to actively aid the multinational coalition against Iraq [18]. On 29 September, the GCC foreign ministers met Velayati in New York and discussed the new relationship that had developed between them and emphasized the need for greater cooperation. The following day, the Saudi Foreign Minister met Velayati separately and discussed the possibility of normalising relations between their two countries [19].

In early December 1990, Iran launched a large air, sea and military exercise code-named "Piroozi" in the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, which lasted for ten days. Velayati then set off on a tour of the GCC states. The timing of the military exercise and tour was significant. It took place just prior to the convening of the GCC Summit in Doha. At this Summit, the Iranian Ambassador to Doha was invited to attend one of its sessions, which was indeed an unusual move on the part of the GCC. In the Doha Declaration, a separate section was included on relations with Iran wherein, the GCC expressed its desire to establish good neighbourly relations with Iran on the basis of non-interference in domestic affairs and respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity [20]. The

Iranian foreign minister welcomed the outcome of the Doha Summit and hoped that this would mark, “the beginning for the Gulf states to begin basic cooperation towards protection of the security of the Gulf region... and that it would end the presence of the alien forces as soon as possible.”[21]

From the foregoing analysis it is clear that the GCC was going all out to normalise relations with Iran and keep it out of the conflict even if it did not support the anti-Iraqi coalition. The GCC was partly successful in this endeavour because Iran not only condemned the Iraqi aggression but also reiterated its decision to honour all UN resolutions on the crisis. The Iranian government’s decision to condemn Iraq and stay neutral as far as possible was not an easy one, as there was tremendous pressure within Iran for supporting Iraq, from the hardliners. The radical voices within Iran of Ahmad Khomeini, Ali Akbar Mohtashani and Mehdi Karroubi called for *jihad* and terrorist activity against the US and its allies in order to throw the foreign forces out of the Gulf. In September 1990, Ayatollah Khomeini was on the verge of endorsing the call of the hardliners to Iranians to come to the aid of Iraq in its fight against western imperialism. However, as the Iranian oil production and revenues soared and the economic benefits started accruing rapidly, these voices gradually receded into the background[22].

Iran and the War

Following the outbreak of war between Iraq and the multinational forces in January 1991, Iran made it clear that it will not join either of the combatants at any cost and would remain neutral. Although Tehran’s support of all the UN Security Council resolutions against Iraq and its declared policy of neutrality was, in fact, tilted towards the West and the GCC, many doubted the ability of Iran to remain neutral for long, given the tremendous internal pressure in Iran for supporting Iraq. However, the Tehran government withstood all internal pressures and faithfully adhered to its policy of neutrality throughout the period of the conflict. In late January 1991, after having consulted Algeria, Yemen, France, the USSR and the Non-Aligned Movement, Iran called for an Islamic solution to the conflict. On 4 September President Rafsanjani announced that the terms of an Iranian peace initiative had been conveyed to Saddam Hussein through his deputy who had come to Tehran. The main points of the Iranian initiative were as follows: (a) a cease-fire in the war followed by; (b) withdrawal of Iraq from Kuwait followed by; (c) withdrawal of all foreign forces from the Gulf—the US, British, French, etc.; (d) replacement of Iraqi and foreign troops in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia by an Islamic peace-keeping force; (e) an end to the embargo against Iraq and (f) in deference of the Iraqi insistence on the ‘linkage’ of the conflict in Kuwait with other conflicts in West Asia, particularly the continuing Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, Iran called for an immediate halt to the Jewish influx into the Occupied Territories[23].

While the Iranian peace initiative was welcomed by the Soviet Union, it was rejected by the US. The American President’s immediate response was that: “There is nothing to mediate”. However, the US Secretary of State, James Baker, later outlined an ambitious plan for economic reconstruction in West Asia and a new Gulf security set-up in which Iran was expected to play a role. Welcoming the Iranian initiative, the French Foreign Minister, described Iran as an essential piece in West Asia security and the French President Mitterrand took a personal initiative and spoke to Rafsanjani on telephone[24]. Shortly after the US rejected the Iranian proposals, Saddam Hussein himself dismissed it, stating that Iraq had no intention of withdrawing from Kuwait and

accusing the US of trying to dominate the oil-rich Gulf by destroying Iraq. The Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister observed, "Kuwait was just a cover up. The question is one of US and Zionist aggression to destroy Iraq and subjugate the entire region." [25] Despite the setback, Tehran continued to call for restraint on the part of the US-led coalition. It urged the multinational forces not to initiate hostilities on the ground until the limits of Iraq's flexibility had been determined. However, the countries contributing to the multinational force were unwilling by that time, to allow Iraq to drag on the conflict still further.

As the war in Kuwait intensified, at one point it seemed that Israel too might be dragged into the conflict due to Iraqi provocations. It was at this stage that the possibility of Iran joining the war seemed imminent. In an apparent reference to possible Israeli retaliation against Iraqi missile attacks, Iran "will go to the aid of other Muslim states if they are attacked by the illegal Zionist entity", Khomeini told a delegation of Jordanian Moslem Brotherhood members. He, however, added that, "the cause of the Iraqi people and of the Muslim nation of Iraq is very different from the cause of Saddam Hussein and his associates" [26].

As the air bombardment of Iraq and Kuwait continued, Tehran accused the US-led coalition of exceeding the mandate of the UN resolution by seeking to totally destroy Iraq's military and industrial infrastructure. It issued an unusually stern warning to the Allied nations fighting the war against Iraq that they should not harbour any ambition, which centres around the dismemberment of Iraq after the war. It also specifically warned Turkey, which borders Iraq and was part of the anti-Iraqi coalition not to attempt to occupy northern Iraq where the oil fields of Mosul and Kirkuk are located [27]. In late January 1991, in a surprise development, more than one hundred Iraqi aircrafts landed in Iran without having sought permission to do so. This was an embarrassing development for Iran and Foreign Minister Velayati, voicing protest over the Iraqi act, assured the west that it would hold the Iraqi pilots and aircrafts till the end of the war [28].

The conclusion of hostilities towards the end of February triggered off a widespread uprising in Iraq against Saddam Hussein. A Shia-led rebellion in Central and Southern Iraq posed a serious challenge to the Baath rule and troops loyal to Saddam Hussein were instructed to suppress it brutally. The intensification of repressive measures against the leaders of the revolt, particularly the arrest of Ayatollah Khomeini, the main religious leader of Iraqi Shiites, earned the ire of Iran. President Rafsanjani condemned the brutal suppression of the Shiite revolt in Iraq and, in a move aimed at administering a sharp rebuff to Saddam Hussein, declared that it would confiscate the Iraqi planes, which had entered Iranian territory during the war. Iran also allowed Hojjatolislam Mohammed Baqir Alhakim, leader of an Iraqi Shiite movement opposed to Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, to broadcast statements from Tehran proclaiming that the Shiites were battling to establish an Islamic state in Southern Iraq [29]. The damage inflicted by the Iraqi armed forces on the Shiite shrines at Najaf, Karbala and Samarra was condemned by Tehran, and Rafsanjani, in one of his *Friday Sermons*, asked Saddam Hussein to submit to the will of Iraqi people. He said: "If the people are ready to take control of Iraq you welcome it since it is impossible for the ruling Baath Party to rebuild the country because neither the people of the country, nor regional people or even the world recognised it" [30].

Iraq accused Iran of providing material and human support for the southern and central rebellions citing the involvement of Tehran-based Supreme Assembly of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq

(SAIRI). In a clear indication of deteriorating relations, Iraq later resumed support for the insurgency activities of the largest Iranian dissident group, the Mujahiddin-e-Khalq and the Kurdish Democratic Party. Eventual suppression of the internal rebellion by Iraqi forces led to mass exodus of Kurds and Shiites across the Iranian border. By April over half a million refugees had fled to Iran while another million were turned away by Iran, as it did not have enough resources to cope with the exodus. Iran had earlier stated that it would not close its borders to Iraqis seeking sanctuary following the crushing of the rebellion by the Iraqi government but in view of the extremely large numbers it had to turn them away since it was inconceivable that Iran would be able to help them because the supplies were just not adequate[31].

Thus, Iran supported the Western move to establish 'safe-havens' for Iraqi Kurds in northern Iraq. In April, a proposal by the UK Prime Minister, John Major, that a UN supervised enclave be created in northern Iraq for the protection of the Kurdish population was approved by the European community. The US warned Iraq that any interference in relief operations north of latitude 36°N would prompt military retaliation. Throughout the following month, Iran accused Iraq of persecuting Shiite Muslims who had fled into the marshes of southern Iraq after the crushing of the southern rebellion.

Outcome of Iran's Policy

Iran's policy of neutrality during the second Gulf war paid rich dividends, in terms of rehabilitation in the comity of nations. Long considered a pariah state, Iran suddenly found itself the centre of attraction, both regionally as well as globally. Tehran became the hub of diplomatic activity as a stream of foreign dignitaries poured into the Iranian capital with a view to finding a solution to the Gulf crisis.

The Kuwaiti crisis saw a dramatic improvement in relations between Iran and the West and Iran and the Arab world. Towards the end of September 1990, Iran and UK reestablished diplomatic relations after Tehran assured the UK of its respect for International Law and its sincere desire to achieve the release of Western hostages held in Lebanon by pro-Iranian radical Shiite groups. The UK, on its part, assured Iran that it respected Islam and understood the offence that Rushdie's novel has caused to Islam and to the Muslims world over. Britain neither insisted on the withdrawal of the *fatwa* against Rushdie nor the release of Roger Cooper, a British businessman, held in Iran since 1985 without trial[32]. Shortly after the normalisation of Iran-UK relations, the EC revoked its ban on senior level diplomatic contacts with Iran.

Iran's relations with the US also improved significantly during and after the Kuwaiti crisis. Indicating the American recognition of Iran's regional importance, the US President told journalists in Washington that as a big country like Iran should not be forever treated as enemy by all countries of the region. It is reported that US efforts to seek direct talks and a rapprochement with Iran were highlighted by Bush's comment that his country wanted better relations and no animosity. Following the Gulf war, the World Bank extended to Iran its first loan since 1978 — a loan made possible by the US decision to remain neutral on the matter[33]. Simultaneously, Iranian oil sales to the US, which had ceased in 1987, were officially resumed in June 1991 following the approval of the US Treasury for American companies to purchase 250,000 barrels of Iranian crude. In October, the Iranian government released Jon Patts, an American engineer who

had been sentenced to ten years of imprisonment on spying charges, as a sign of the improving bilateral ties between the two countries.

Nearer home, the Kuwaiti crisis led to an all round improvement in Iran's relations with the Arab world. In March 1991, Saudi-Iranian relations were restored and the Saudi Foreign Minister visited Tehran in early June. Riyadh also agreed to receive 115,000 Iranian pilgrims during the Haj instead of a fixed quota of 45,000 decided after the 1987 clashes. Relations between Iran and Egypt also improved with both deciding to set up an interest office in each other's capital as a first step towards the restoration of full diplomatic relations. Following a ten-year break, the Iranian embassy in Amman was also reopened in March 1991. In late 1990, Iran along with Syria mediated between the rival Shiite Lebanese militia Hizbollah and Amal and brought about a peace settlement between them. Tehran and Damascus were also instrumental in achieving progress towards the release of all hostages being held in Lebanon.

End Notes

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3. Ibid., p.172.
4. Marion Farouk Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, *Iraq since 1958* (London: KPI, 1987), p.120.
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6. Judith Miller and Laurie Mylroie, *Saddam Hussein and the Crisis in the Gulf* (New York: Time Books, 1990), pp.132-34.
7. William Saffire, "A Dangerous Thing" in James Ridgeway, ed., *The March to War* (New York: Four Walls, 1991), pp. 28-30.
8. A.H.H. Abidi, "Roots and Dimensions of the Border Dispute Between Iraq and Kuwait", *International Studies* (New Delhi), vol. 28, No.2, April-June 1991, pp. 139-40.
9. Saffire, n.7, p.30.
10. *The Times of India* (Delhi), 11 August 1990.
11. Ibid., 12 September 1990.
12. Gulshan Dietl, *Through Two Wars and Beyond: A Study of Gulf Cooperation Council* (New Delhi: Lancer Books, 1991), p.263.
13. Ibid., 265.

14. Ibid., 268.
15. Ibid., 263.
16. *The Times of India* (Delhi), 5 September 1990.
17. Ibid., 19 September, 1990.
19. It may be recalled that this was the first high level face-to-face contact between the two sides since the snapping of diplomatic relations between the two in 1987.
20. Dietl, n. 12, p. 264.
21. *SWB/ME/0956/i* (a & b), 28 December 1990.
22. Dietl, n.12, p.263.
23. *The Hindu* (New Delhi), 5 February 1991. Also see *Indian Express* (Delhi), 6 February 1991.
24. *International Herald Tribune*, 10 February 1991.
25. *The Hindu*, 11 February 1991.
26. *Patriot* (New Delhi), 6 February 1991.
27. *Hindustan Times* (New Delhi), 4 February 1991.
28. *The Statesman* (New Delhi), 6 February 1991.
29. *International Herald Tribune*, 8 March 1991.
30. *Indian Express*, 10 March 1991.
31. *International Herald Tribune*, 8 April 1991.
32. Ibid., 28 September 1990.
33. *Indian Express*, 19 March 1991.