

Role of the Gulf countries in Iraqi crisis

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The recent crisis over the UN inspection in Iraq attracted the attention of international community when Iraq decided not to cooperate with the United Nations special commission (UNSCOM) which visited Iraq for searching presidential suites in connection with weapons of mass destruction. Iraq, indeed, has expressed serious reservations about nature of composition of the Upper case. The UNSCOM inspection team was led by an American Scott Ritter who was one of the nine Americans in the 16-member team. Apart from them, there were five British, one Russian and one Australian. The team visited Iraq on 11 January 1998. The present paper seeks to analyse the reactions of few important countries of the Middle East and North Africa to this US mediated inspection of Iraqi weapons sites. In addition to that, it also seeks to discuss the stand taken by these countries in the Gulf War of 1991, which followed the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990.

Introduction

The modern Iraqi State was created out of the former Ottoman villages (provinces) of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul. Almost the entire territory of modern Iraq had come under control of the United Kingdom in 1920 following the defeat and subsequent disintegration of the Ottoman empire after the world war I. Iraq got independence in 1932. Nevertheless, the dominance of the British continued in the affairs of the country until July 1958. On 14 July 1958, the Iraqi monarchy was overthrown by a group of army officers known as the 'Free Officers', and a republican regime was established. Brigadier, Abdul Karim Qasim, became the first republican premier, and Colonel Abd-al-Salam Arif was chosen as his deputy. However, the differences between Qasim and Arif came to the surface immediately after 1958 revolution. These differences soon crystallized around the key policy question- union with Egypt. Arif, encouraged by the Ba'th party, favoured prompt union, while Qasim rejected this idea outrightly. Their policy differences soon led to a struggle for the leadership which culminated in the execution of Qasim and assumption of power by Arif with the support of Ba'th party in February, 1963. Arif remained president and commander-in-chief until he was killed in a helicopter crash on 13 April, 1966, whereupon, after a brief power struggle, his brother Abd al-Rahman Arif became president. His regime did not last long and on 17th July 1968 a coup was staged by General Ahmad Hassan al Bakr, supported by Michel Aflaq- an ideologue of the Ba'th party which toppled Abd al-Rehman Arif. Now Ahmad Hassan al Bakr assumed power as President and commander in chief of the armed forces. Saddam Hussein was second-in-Command of the Ba'th party as well as government. On 16 July 1978, President al Bakr resigned on account of his poor health and Saddam Hussein took his place as president of the republic and commander-in-chief of the armed forces. During the rule of Saddam Hussein, Iraq experienced two wars. A prolonged war with neighbouring Iran (1980-88), followed by the Gulf War of 1991.

Operation Desert Storm and Saudi Arabia

During Iran-Iraq war, Saudi Arabia helped Iraq monetarily as Saudi government had considered the call given by Iranian spiritual leader Khomeini to export Islamic revolution to other countries of the region, a threat to its traditional monarchy. Saudi Arabian concern about its capacity to defend herself was further demonstrated in August, 1990, when Iraq invaded and annexed Kuwait and proceeded to deploy armed forces along the Kuwaiti-Saudi Arabian border. King Fahd of Saudi Arabia not only condemned the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait but also offered refuge to the Amir of Kuwait. Kuwait, indeed, established a Government-in-exile at Taif, Saudi Arabia. In addition to that, King Fahd announced the deployment of multinational armed forces in Saudi Arabia in order to deter an attack on the country by Iraq.

Recent Crisis

Right from the beginning of the present crisis, Saudi government had opposed any move to attack Iraq. As Kofi Annan, Secretary General, of the UN prepared for a meeting with the Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, King Fahd said that he wanted a peaceful solution to the problem. King Fahd, at a meeting with former President of Iran, Ali Akbar Rafsanjani, expressed the hope that “Kofi Annan’s mission would be a success so as to avoid additional suffering for Iraq and the Iraqi people”. This sympathetic attitude of Saudi Arabia vis-à-vis Iraq, as compared to the Gulf crisis, may be attributed to various factors. Firstly, deployment of multinational forces or US led forces may create a furore among the Saudi people. Indeed ninety percent of Saudis opposed a US military strike against Iraq as shown in a rare opinion poll published on 21 February 1998 in the London-based Arabic language newspaper, Asharq Al Awsat. The poll of 330 Saudi men and women conducted by the aforesaid newspaper showed that 90.3 percent of respondents were against any attack. While only 5.5 percent of them supported a military strike, the rest gave no response. Asked to explain their stand, 69 percent of those opposed to an attack expressed their sympathy for the Iraqi people. About one third of the people interviewed, said they saw no justification for such an attack. Another 22.5 percent of those opposed to an attack viewed this as a double standard in the US policy. They hinted at the US treatment of Iraq and Israel.

Secondly, deployment of multinational forces during the Gulf war 1991 had been a costly affair for Saudi Arabia from economic viewpoint. Saudi government feared that outbreak of any hostility in the region may again result in the deployment of foreign forces, which would be detrimental for Saudi economy. Thirdly, any possible attack on Iraq by the USA would further weaken Iraq and thus add to the confidence of Israel, which Saudi Government did not want because of the deteriorating Saudi-Israeli relations due to Israeli plans in 1997 to recommence construction of Jewish settlements in East Jerusalem. Fourthly, stationing of the US led multinational troops in the holy land of Saudi Arabia in the aftermath of Kuwaiti crisis neither received support from Islamic radicals within the Kingdom nor majority of Muslim community all over the world.

Iran and the Conflict over Kuwait

Iran condemned Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 and offered to defend other Gulf states from Iraqi aggression. However, the deployment of a multinational force for the defence of Saudi Arabia, simultaneously, had been criticised by Iran. Furthermore, Iran urged the simultaneous and unconditional withdrawal of western armed forces from the Gulf region, and of Iraqi armed forces from Kuwait. Nevertheless, when the bombardment of Iraq and occupied Kuwait was going on by the US-led multinational forces, Iran accused the multinational forces of exceeding the terms of resolutions adopted by the UN Security Council by seeking to destroy Iraq's military and industrial facilities. Meanwhile, more than 100 Iraqi fighter aircrafts landed in Iran without having sought permission to do so. Iran lodged protest with Iraq and impounded both the aircrafts and their pilots for the entire duration of the conflict.

Recent Crisis and Iranian Stand

Foreign Minister of Iraq paid a visit to Iran in February, 98 and urged Iran to continue its diplomatic efforts as head of the 55-member Organisation of the Islamic Conference to avoid a showdown in the region. Iranian counterpart, Mr. Kharrazi, responded promptly and opposed any sort of military attack on Iraq by the foreign powers. "Foreigners seek their aims of boosting their presence and harming regional states, but we believe that no use of force is needed to carry out United Nations Resolutions and that, this is possible through Iraqi cooperation with UN inspections", Iran's television quoted Mr. Kharrazi, telling the Iraqi foreign minister. He went on to say, "there should be coordinated political efforts towards carrying out the United Nations resolutions while safeguarding the honour of Iraqi people."

On analysis we find that Iran's relations with the USA and the Western World have never been cordial since the establishment of Islamic government in Iran in 1979 owing to factors such as 'American hostage crisis', 'Rushdie affair' and US-help to Iraq during crucial phase of Iran-Iraq war. These strained relations further worsened in the recent past when USA accused Iran repeatedly of sponsoring state terrorism. Another factor, which prompted Iran to oppose attack, was its worry over the issue of refugees. As a matter of fact, Iran had already been facing this problem because the country has 1.2 million Afghan refugees and 6,00,000 Iraqi refugees. Yet another US military attack against Iraq could have flooded Iran with more refugees.

Jordan and the 1991 Gulf War

Iranian proposal to end the Gulf crisis was also supported by Jordan. Moreover, King Hussein proposed a peace plan linking the Iraqi-Kuwait dispute and the Arab-Israeli conflict. He also urged the convening of a peace conference on the Middle East, and held that all Arab leaders should take part in a dialogue to resolve the crisis. The King's diplomatic efforts continued as he embarked, in January 1991, on a tour of European capitals in a final attempt to avert war in the Gulf region. However, all these efforts of the King could not prevent war in the region. Following the outbreak of hostilities between Iraq and multinational forces on 16 January 1991, the Jordanian government condemned the bombardment of Iraq as a brutal onslaught against the Arab and the Muslim nations. Large-scale anti-western and anti-Israeli demonstrations were organised throughout the country and overwhelming popular support for Iraq was expressed in all sections of society.

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Jordan opposed any form of attack, which would aggravate problems of Iraqi people further and expressed its desire to make diplomatic efforts for bringing about a peaceful solution to the problem. Foreign Minister of Jordan, Dr. Fayiz al-Jarawinah, in an interview with Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan Radio stated that, "Jordanian policy was based on the concept of resolving conflicts peacefully and resorting to the language of dialogue rather than violence and to the method of negotiation, rather than confrontation. Based on these principles, which guaranteed to peoples their rights to live in peace and security and which protected unnamed citizens from disasters, death and displacement, Jordan called on all the parties concerned in this conflict to continue exerting diplomatic efforts aimed at bringing about the implementation of UN Security Council resolutions in order to achieve total commitment to and respect for international legitimacy,"

As discussed, Jordan's stand in respect to recent crisis was the same as during Gulf crisis. Of all the Arab states affected, probably Jordan was the worst sufferer during Gulf war. The loss of remittances from thousands of Jordanian workers who returned from Iraq and Kuwait; the loss of as much as one quarter of the country's exports and its transit trade with Iraq and Kuwait; termination of Saudi Oil supply due to equivocal stance of the country towards invasion of Kuwait; the enormous cost of humanitarian aid to thousands of refugees fleeing the conflict. It is natural that any country, which suffered so much owing to the Gulf war would never favour any sort of conflict in the region. In addition, Iraq remains the main source of oil supply for Jordan after the Saudi decision to halt oil supply to Jordan.

Gulf War and Syria

Prior to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in April 1990, Syria expressed support for Iraq's right to defend itself in any conflict with Israel. In August 1990, however, Syria was eager to exploit the diplomatic opportunities arising out of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, particularly to improve its relations with USA and Egypt. Hence, Syria supported Egypt's efforts to coordinate Arab responses to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and agreed, at an emergency summit meeting of the Arab League, held in Cairo on 10 August 1990, to send troops to Saudi Arabia as part of a pan-Arab deterrent force supporting the US effort to deter an Iraqi invasion of Saudi Arabia. Despite, widespread popular support among Syria's Palestinian population for the Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, Syria committed itself to the demand for an unconditional Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait, and later in August, the first contingent of Syrian troops was deployed in Saudi Arabia, joining a multinational force that was predominantly composed of US military personnel. In September, the US Secretary of State, James Baker, paid a visit to Syria and during meeting with Syrian president Hafiz Asad, emphasized the importance of establishing a dialogue with Syria. Thus Syria's opposition to Iraq's occupation of Kuwait resulted in improved US-Syrian ties.

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However, position of Syria on the recent issue of UN inspection, has been against any attack on Iraq. Syria viewed US tough policy on Iraq as causing further damage to the battered Middle East peace process. An official Syrian newspaper Syria Times on 19 February 1998 mentioned,

“President Clinton’s decision to escalate tension in the Gulf over arms inspection on Iraq leaves a large question mark over the future of the Middle East peace and American attitude towards the Arab-Israeli conflict.” The paper further stated: “By acceding to Israeli demands to have more arms and to freeze the peace talks, it may finally destroy the very notion that Washington can act as an honest broker any more.”

Syria’s opposition to American attacks on Iraq may be understood as Syria’s antipathy towards US policy. Syria, indeed, viewed the recent threat of American attack on Iraq as a reflection of US dual policy, i.e. soft and lenient towards Israel whereas harsh and rigid towards Iraq. In addition, Syrian regime believes that an attack might be followed by Kurdish uprising in Iraq, which could set a dangerous precedent for its minorities and particularly for the six percent Kurdish population. Furthermore, Syria had shown interest in establishing trade links with Iraq in recent past – a reflection of improved Syrian-Iraqi relationship.

Egypt’s position in the Gulf Crisis

In November 1989, reports of widespread acts of violent discrimination against Egyptian expatriate workers in Iraq threatened the special relationship, which had developed between Egypt and Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war, when Egypt provided Iraq with military equipment and advisers. Nevertheless, prior to the crisis in the Gulf precipitated by Iraq’s invasion and annexation of Kuwait in August 1990, Egypt sought to mediate between Iraq and Kuwait, appealing for dialogue between the two sides in the interest of Arab solidarity. However, like majority of other Arab countries, Egypt also condemned Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and initially wanted to act as a mediator. But when the war started, Egypt dispatched 5000 troops to Saudi Arabia as part of an Arab deterrent force. This was further increased to 35,000. In addition, Egypt also supported UN move of economic sanctions to be imposed on Iraq. On the domestic front, there were few disturbances during the war owing to Egypt’s support to the anti-Iraqi coalition. In fact, Egypt emerged from the conflict in the Gulf with its international reputation enhanced.

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President, Hosni Mubarak, has called on the international community to launch diplomatic efforts to resolve the crisis. In a statement to chief editor of Al-Akhbar newspaper, he said that the time was not right for any military operations and the use of the force would ‘increase tension in the region. President Mubarak stated that it was important to make greater efforts to find alternatives that would persuade Iraq to respect the UN Security Council resolutions. He appealed to the Iraqi leadership to contain the situation for the sake of the Iraqi people and to spare them from further sufferings.

Domestic compulsions as well as foreign policy considerations would explain the Egyptian ‘no’ to war. Since the early part of 1992, militant Islamic groups have intensified their campaign to overthrow the government and establish an Islamic state. Egypt’s support to America and Britain’s call for military aggression against Iraq would have provided an opportunity to these Islamist group to further intensify their campaign and seek popular support to overthrow Mubarak’s regime. The Government’s foreign policy since the end of the crisis in the Gulf has continued to focus on the twin themes of Arab reconciliation and a settlement of the Arab-Israeli dispute.

Conflict in the region at this juncture, might have necessitated these changes in the Egypt's foreign policy. Apart from these reasons, relations with the USA remained strained with Egypt convinced that the Clinton Administration had faltered in its role as an impartial mediator in the region because of its close alliance with Israel.

Conclusion

At last, the UN experts were allowed to inspect the Presidential palace, by the Iraqis, after Kofi Annan, UN Secretary-General, clinched an agreement with Saddam Hussein and thus seemingly resolved a dispute, which threatened to escalate into full scale war. Iraqi President may be portraying it as a diplomatic and moral victory over the USA before the Iraqi people. Nevertheless, credit of this so-called victory does not go to Saddam alone. The important factors responsible to prevent hostilities in the Gulf needs to be mentioned.

It is important to note that the International community viewed that another US attack on Iraq would further aggravate the sufferings of thousands of Iraqi people already victims of starvation, malnutrition, disease etc. Even now, despite the obvious need for essential supplies to ease the suffering of the Iraqi population, the Clinton Administration is opposed to the idea of removal of the economic sanctions until Saddam Hussein has been removed from power. This adamant attitude of Clinton administration has evoked sympathy of the international community towards the Iraqi people.

The Arab leaders, perhaps, felt that Clinton Administration had failed to act as an impartial mediator with regard to a whole range of Middle East issues notable Arab-Israeli peace process and Iraqi Crisis. In fact, the Clinton Administration's involvement in the peace process was so unproductive that it led to near collapse of the Middle East peace process. According to a widely accepted opinion the USA has favoured Israel unfairly and has been indifferent to the interests of other states in the region, which include its own allies. This perceived partiality, on the part of Clinton administration has resulted in the drifting of even its traditional allies in the Gulf to the side of Iraq.

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