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Iraq's Invasion of Kuwait (1990): Conflict Build-up, Regional Diplomacy and US's Stance

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Abstract

The change in politics is a rapid phenomenon. This is more so with anarchic international politics. During the eight-year-long Iran-Iraq war, almost all the rich and powerful states of the world supported Iraq, financially and militarily. However, the year 1990 witnessed a dramatic turnaround in the relations between Iraq, its neighbours and the United States (US). The states that supported Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war opposed the occupation and subsequent declaration of merger of Kuwait with Iraq, by Saddam Hussain, (the President of Iraq) as the 19th province, as unwarranted. Subsequently, a United Nations (UN) sanctioned force launched a united offensive against Iraq to free Kuwait from Iraqi occupation.

In this paper, I have made an attempt to comprehend the diplomatic efforts made by the regional leaders to thwart the impending Iraq-Kuwait war in a contextual perspective. I argue that the US laid a trap for Saddam Hussain, the then prevailing dire economic conditions of Iraq after the Iran-Iraq war also pushed Saddam Hussain into the trap. I further argue that the diplomatic strategies of Saddam Hussain to deal with the US and Arab leaders were quintessentially flawed, that forced Iraq to invade Kuwait.

Keywords: Iraq, Kuwait, war, diplomacy, Saddam Hussain

Introduction

The gruelling eight-year-long Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), that too without any substantial gains for Iraq, increased its difficulties in rebuilding the destroyed state infrastructure (Sluglett and Sluglett 2001). As a result, the outcomes of the Iran-Iraq war became a prelude for a conflict with another neighbouring state of Iraq, Kuwait. The Iraq-Kuwait conflict of 1990-91 was not new; the conflict had its antecedents in the colonial rule (Khadduri 1969). The immediate trigger to the age-old conflict between Iraq and Kuwait was the direct outcome of the economic, military, and political consequences of the Iran-Iraq war for Iraq. For instance, after the end of the Iran-Iraq war, Iraq had accumulated massive debt, which was estimated around 50-80 billion US dollars. Whereas, at the beginning of the war with Iran in 1980, it had 35 billion dollars' worth of foreign reserves (Mofid 1990: 134).

The Arab Gulf states proactively provided monetary and military support to Iraq during the war to prevent the export of revolutionary fervour by Iran to other West Asian states. When it came to the reconstruction of the Iraqi state after the end of the war, the same states stopped extending the support. As a result, it became extremely difficult for Saddam Hussain to take up the post-war rebuilding activity for the state. He either postponed or gave up most of the developmental projects due to the lack of funds. Even to focus only on very essential projects with an aim to stimulate the economy, Iraq did not have the financial resources. Therefore, Saddam Hussain made an appeal to oil-rich Gulf states for help, but they were not forthcoming to extend the line of credit. Moreover, the states that gave loans, like Kuwait, asked Iraq to

return the money that it owed (Edwards and Hinchcliffe, 2004). This step was taken by the Kuwaiti leadership, knowing too well that the capacity of producing crude oil by Iraq in 1990 was bare minimum, in comparison to 1980 levels because of systematic attacks on its oil establishments by Iran (Potter and Sick, 2004). To make the scenario worse, in the international market, the price of oil also fell drastically, which further compounded the economic worries of Iraq.

The other challenge that Iraq was grappling with was related to the maintenance of a large army raised during the Iran-Iraq war. The strength of the army was around one million, out of the total 19 million population in 1988 (Khadduri and Ghareeb, 1997: 80). The government was unable to maintain the huge army and pay them regular salaries; therefore, it faced recurrent revolts in the military garrisons. There were four attempts between 1988 and 1990 to overthrow or kill Saddam Hussain by his own military commanders (al-Marashi and Salama, 2008).

Despite fighting an eight-year-long war, the main threat to Iraq was still coming from Iran. Given the circumstances, in terms of population, territory, and resources, Iran was far ahead of Iraq. The entire eastern Gulf coast, including strategically crucial islands, was under the control of Iran. Whereas, the Gulf coast of Iraq was just about forty miles long, and it was largely made up of river silt, which was not at all suitable to build a maritime port and accompanying facilities. (Karsh 1990). Therefore, Iraq was concerned about its maritime trade security, as it was susceptible to Iranian disruptions. Hence, Iraq requested Kuwait to give the territorial control over *Umm Qasr*, *Warba,* and *Bubiyan* islands to build maritime facilities, to meet its commercial and security requirements. Kuwait did not respond positively to Iraq's request for the transfer of the islands, thus hindering its safe navigation (Khalidi, 1991).

To come out of all these economic and geopolitical quagmires confronted immediately after the Iran-Iraq War, Iraq once again accelerated the strategy of rearmament. The idea behind this move was to blackmail the neighbouring states for funds needed to set right the domestic challenges and to secure the Iraqi borders. Iraq's rearmament strategy raised concerns in the region. The issue of Iraqi armament was seen as a national security threat by Israel, and it actively raised it with American officials. Consequently, the armament plan of Saddam Hussain put Iraq in the American scanner from 1989 onwards (Khadduri and Ghareeb 1997). Thus, in this paper, an attempt is made to comprehend the diplomatic efforts made by the regional leaders to thwart the impending Iraq-Kuwait War in a contextual passion. The paper also examines the diplomatic strategies of Saddam Hussain to deal with the US and Arab leaders before he invaded Kuwait.

Regional negotiations to fix oil prices and adherence to quotas

Iraq’s failure to convince Kuwait and other Arab neighbours to provide finances for reconstruction compelled Iraq to generate revenue from its own oil sector. However, in 1989, the revenue generated from the massively war-damaged oil sector was too small to meet even its primary expenses. On the other hand, the neighbouring state Kuwait was overproducing than its agreed-upon quota of oil. It led to a sharp drop in prices in the international crude oil market. To extricate itself from this dire situation, Iraq appealed to the petroleum-exporting Gulf states to agree to increase the price of oil by not doing overproduction.

The overproduction by Gulf states occurred during the Iraq-Iran war because the oil-producing capacity of both Iraq and Iran rapidly plummeted due to the relentless attacks and destruction of oil-producing infrastructure (Edwards and Hinchcliffe, 2004: 99-100). There were two reasons leading to overproduction: to take advantage of the situation to augment their own revenues and to finance Iraq in the war. However, after the war, Kuwait refused to go back to its 1980 oil production quota. As a result,

the price of crude oil in the international market considerably dropped and touched the low of eight dollars per barrel in 1988-89. It was a sharp reduction. Before the Iraq-Iran war, the oil price was around twenty-five dollars per barrel (Khadduri and Ghareeb, 1997: 80).

Along with Iraq, other oil-producing states like Saudi Arabia and Iran were also in favour of a higher level of prices. They had proposed eighteen dollars per barrel of crude as a base price, as well as the reduction of oil quotas to accommodate Iraq, in the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) meeting in 1989. Although OPEC's decision to fix eighteen dollars as a base price was significantly short of Iraq's expected twenty-five dollars per barrel, Iraq gave its consent. However, Kuwait was adamant about maintaining its war quota of oil production, and it refused to adhere to its revised quota fixed by OPEC. The Kuwaiti leadership maintained that they would produce the oil depending on market demand and would not follow the revised OPEC quota (the quota fixed was 1,037,000 barrels per day as against the Kuwaiti demand of 1,350,000 barrels per day). According to reports, Kuwait was then exporting over 1,700,000 barrels per day (Ibid, 81).

The question arises, why is a small state like Kuwait, with no substantial military defence capabilities at its disposal, behaving like this? Probably, Kuwait took such a firm and persistent stand because it had the undisclosed support of a powerful ally like the US. For survival, Kuwait's dependence on a great power is not something new. Historically speaking, it depended on the Ottoman Empire and Great Britain to maintain its existence and ensure its security. After 1971, Britain's military withdrawal from the Arabian Gulf, the responsibility of policing in the Gulf was assumed by the US (Marr 2011). Now, Kuwait expects the same security cover from the US.

Due to the unyielding stand adopted by Kuwait, the issue of oil price and quota between Iraq and Kuwait became a central point in all the regional multilateral Arab states' meetings that took place post the Iran-Iraq war. In the first half of the year 1990, the politics started taking a confrontational mode between Iraq and Kuwaiti leaderships. To reduce the tempers, the regional Arab diplomacy shifted towards resolving the Iraq-Kuwait feud. For the first time, the war of words was exchanged on 24th February 1990, when Saddam Hussain went to Jordan to participate in the first anniversary of the Arab Cooperation Council (ACC), comprising four states: Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and Yemen as members. In his speech, Saddam Hussain made a scathing attack on the US, accusing it of supporting Kuwait's petulant attitude. This stance of Saddam Hussain made Hosni Mubarak, the President of Egypt and a close ally of the US, angry. To ease the tension, a face-to-face meeting was organised between Saddam Hussain and Hosni Mubarak by the host. During the meeting, Hussain acknowledged the 30 billion dollar loan to Iraq by Kuwait and Saudi Arabia during its difficult war with Iran, and also issued a warning, "If they don't cancel the debt and give me another $30 billion, I shall take steps to retaliate" (Salinger, 1995: 595). Hosni Mubarak cautioned Saddam that "his demands were going to cause a lot of trouble for the region" (Ibid). King Hussain, (the King of Jordan and the host of the conference) was upset about the things that became obvious in the meeting. To defuse the impending grave crisis, King Hussain visited the Arab Gulf States on 26th February 1990, to explore the avenues to resolve the differences through negotiations. He was unsuccessful in convincing the Monarchs of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia to hold negotiations. About his visit, King Hussain briefed Saddam Hussain and informed him that the Amir of Kuwait refused to have any direct negotiations until Iraq formally relinquished all its border claims and recognised the sovereignty of Kuwait over its territories (Tripp 2007). Though Iraq had already recognised Kuwait as an independent state in 1963, it did not sign an agreement related to demarcation of Kuwait's borders (Dawisha 2009).

To create pressure, after meeting King Hussain, Saddam Hussain issued orders and amassed Iraqi troops near the border with Kuwait. In the presence of 21 Arab Heads of State, assembled to attend the summit meeting of the Arab League held in Baghdad on 28th May 1990, Saddam Hussain issued another warning. Citing the Gulf States, he alleged, "They are extracting too much petrol and helping to keep prices at too low a level. Every time the price of a barrel drops by one dollar, Iraq loses dollar 1 billion dollar a year. You're virtually waging an economic war against my country. Indeed, brother Arabs, it has to be clearly understood that we are today living through another conflict" (Khadduri and Ghareeb, 109).

In a speech delivered on 17th July 1990, Saddam Hussain confirmed the eventuality of Kuwait's invasion. He said,

"Thanks to our new weapons, the imperialists can no longer launch a military attack against us, so they have chosen to wage an economic guerrilla war with the help of those agents of imperialism, the leaders of the Gulf States. Their policy of keeping oil prices at low levels is a poisoned dagger planted in Iraq's back. If words fail to protect us, we will have no choice other than to go into action to re-establish the correct state of affairs and restore our rights" (Salinger 1995: 597).

Considering the severity of the evolving situation, this time Hosni Mubarak took up the shuttle diplomacy to ease the tension between Iraq and Kuwait (Pasha 2003). During his visit to Baghdad, Hosni Mubarak told Saddam Hussain that the Kuwaitis are extremely concerned because of the huge mobilisation of Iraqi troops withing 20 kilometres radius of their border on the Iraqi side. Saddam Hussain replied, "regardless of how many troops there were, he would not do anything until he met with the Kuwaitis" (Salinger 1995: 600). He also said, "If, when we meet, we see there is hope, nothing will happen. But if we are unable to find a solution, then it be natural that Iraq will not accept death, even though wisdom is above everything else" (Ibid). The message of Saddam Hussain to Hosni Mubarak was clear: if the scheduled negotiations with Kuwait in Saudi Arabia on 31st July 1990 break down, Iraq will choose the harshest route to deal with Kuwait.

Thus, for both parties, 31st July was a crucial and final day to prevent the conflict. However, the conference organised in Saudi Arabia turned out to be a non-serious event, which led to the invasion of Kuwait because the top leadership of all the states involved in the meeting were diplomatically not capable or willing to prevent it. For instance, just three hours prior to the meeting, the Amir of Kuwait decided not to attend the meeting. In his place, he dispatched a high-level delegation consisting of Crown Prince Sa'ad, the Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister, and the Justice Minister. Saddam Hussain viewed this as an unconscionable and insulting act; therefore, he too withdrew from the conference and sent a delegation. The Iraqi delegation included Izzat Ibrahim (second in command in the Iraqi Ba'ath Party), Deputy Prime Minister Sa'dun Hammadi, and Saddam Hussain's staunch loyalist and cousin Ali Hassan Al-Majid (Dawisha 2009).

As the host of the conference, Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia welcomed both the delegations but did not attend the meeting as a mediator. Izzat Ibrahim opened his written speech and delivered it, which was a reiteration of the already mentioned Iraqi charges levelled against Kuwait. These charges were strongly rebutted by Crown Prince Sa'ad. The moment the meeting's attention shifted to finances, the deliberations became tense. Izzat Ibrahim demanded ten billion dollars as a loan, if Kuwait was not willing to give the amount as a gift. After a lengthy discussion, Crown Prince Sa'ad, in principle, agreed to extend nine billion dollars as a loan. His refusal to grant one billion more did not go well with the Iraqi delegation. The Iraqi delegation viewed this position as an intentionally done act to humiliate Iraq. Izzat Ibrahim reacted to the offer and said, "I don't have the authorization from President Saddam Hussain to accept less

than 10 billion dollars" (Salinger 1995: 601). Such a way of negotiations suggests that if the heads of the states and only power centres in their states, Saddam Hussain and Amir Jabir, had attended the conference, probably a negotiated settlement might have been reached.

King Fahd of Saudi Arabia made an effort to break the deadlock on the question of the remaining one billion dollar demand of Iraq. He announced, Saudi Arabia would pitch in and give the remaining one billion dollars as a gift to Iraq (Khadduri and Ghareeb, 1997: 120). This generous gesture of the Saudi King did not impress the Iraqi delegation at all. As it is stated before, Saddam Hussain not only wanted the money from Kuwait but was also expecting money from other wealthy Arab States as well. The generous offer of Saudi Arabia was too little to meet Iraq's expectations. Probably, the plan of Saddam was that, after dealing with Kuwait, he could shift his focus on other Gulf states.

To break the deadlock, the second round of negotiations commenced. Once again, Iraqi and Kuwaiti delegations were left alone to take forward the negotiations without the presence of the host. During the discussion, Crown Prince Sa'ad put a condition before Izzat Ibrahim. He stated, before they work out all the details concerning a nine billion dollar loan, they should take a decision on the precise demarcation of Kuwait and Iraq's territorial boundaries. He said, "We can do it now, at this meeting, and then the money is yours" (Salinger, 1995: 602). Ibrahim was taken by surprise by this new condition and accused the Kuwaitis of bad faith. He said to Prince Sa'ad, "Iraq knows very well how to get money from them" (Ibid). Those threatening words were the last spoken by an Iraqi delegate, which put an end to the Arab diplomacy for stopping the invasion. Immediately after Ibrahim's appraisal of the negotiations held in Saudi Arabia, Saddam Hussain called an emergent meeting of the Revolutionary Command Council. In the meeting, a decision was taken within an hour to invade Kuwait (Aburish, 1999).

The misleading role of the US

In the initial years after the Iran-Iraq war, the US did not pay much attention to West Asian politics as it was actively involved in the rapidly unfolding political scenario in the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc states. However, it kept sending messages from time to time to Saddam Hussain, reiterating its friendship with Iraq. In February 1990, John Kelly (US Assistant Secretary of State) visited Iraq and had a meeting with Saddam Hussain. In the meeting, Kelly said, "You are a force of moderation in the region, and America wishes to broaden its relations with Iraq" (Salinger, 1995: 597). A few days after Kelly's visit, the Voice of America radio, an official broadcaster of the US, telecast a program on dictators in the world. It listed Saddam Hussain as "one of the worst tyrants in the world" (Ibid). This double speak infuriated Saddam Hussain. The US officials brushed it off as the views of the program presenter; Saddam Hussain was convinced.

In the subsequent two months following the 28th May 1990 Arab League meeting, there were failed diplomatic efforts by the regional leaders to defuse the conflict. The failure brought the possibility of war between Iraq and Kuwait closer. Instead of addressing the looming danger, the US administration continued its positive messaging to Saddam Hussain by ignoring the precise and alarming intelligence reports of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) on the possibility of a war (Khadduri and Ghareeb, 1997). Moreover, in a speech delivered by Tariq Aziz, the Foreign Minister of Iraq, on 16th July 1990 in an Arab League meeting, as well as in the memorandum distributed to all the member states, made the intent of Iraq about Kuwait clear. On 17th July 1990, the first batch of Iraqi troops were moved closer to the border with Kuwait. This was just 16 days preceding the full-fledged invasion and occupation of Kuwait on 1st August 1990 (Finlan 2003).

In the intervening period of those 16 days, no official and definitive warning was issued by the US to Iraq to withdraw the military forces and give a chance to diplomacy to settle all their outstanding issues. However, the US administration had specific information from the intelligence sources (Salinger 1995). In fact, on 25th July 1990, Saddam Hussain and April Glaspie (US Ambassador to Iraq) had a physical meeting. Wherein, Ambassador Glaspie lauded the efforts of Saddam Hussain to rebuild Iraq and empathised with him for the need of funds for Iraqi reconstruction. In the course of discussion, she said, "We have no opinion on Arab-Arab conflicts, like your border disagreement with Kuwait" (Ryan, 2009: 57). The examination of the US administration's political actions reveals, in spite of knowing too well the belligerent intentions of Saddam Hussain towards Kuwait, the US did not make any effort to address them. Rather, the administration gave a green signal to Saddam Hussain's plan to invade Kuwait.

Conclusion

Thus, the examination of the conflict build-up between Iraq and Kuwait, failed diplomatic efforts, and the US's misleading stands led to the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq. By occupying Kuwait, Saddam Hussain wanted to send a strong message that he can go to any extent if defiance is shown to Iraq's interests. He grossly underestimated the response to his aggressive actions. The conflict had clearly demonstrated the limitations of Iraq's military power and the flawed diplomatic and military strategies of Saddam Hussain. The invasion launched to assert Iraq's supremacy in the region based on its military strength turned its fortune otherwise. The war with Iran destroyed its economic strength, and the invasion of Kuwait resulted in the devastation of its military power.

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