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The Gulf War - A Clash of Cultures and Interests

Abstract

The whole world kept their eyes on the events unfolding in the Middle East in 1990. Saddam Hussein launched his massive forces against Kuwait and soon got hold of the small, but extremely rich state, claiming it had always belonged to Iraq. The response came in the form of a state-of-the-art military offensive from the United Nations coalition forces. The Gulf War was the first fully televised and broadcast war in history, the public could follow the events live and breaking. My paper shall explore the true reasons behind this attack, bringing forth the infamous Saddam Hussein –April Glaspie meeting (ambassador to the USA in Iraq), in which she made misleading remarks and the several failed attempts at negotiation to prevent the war, all refused by the United States. My argument will hypothesize that it was in the core interest of the USA to strike militarily in order to maintain the balance of power in the Middle East thus providing a clearer picture between the two opposing opinions as per the cause of the Gulf War: protecting Kuwait from the dictator and attempting to gain full control over the vast oil reserves of Kuwait. Since, it is not all black and white.

Keywords: Gulf War, Saddam Hussein, April Glaspie, American foreign policy, George Bush, Kuwait

A little more than a decade after the shameful ending of the Vietnam War, the attention of the world was again focused on the United States, launching a military offensive thousands of miles off the coasts of her mainland. The year was 1990, the beginning of the last decade of the twentieth century, when communication technology was sufficient enough to broadcast events leading to the liberation of Kuwait and the military actions themselves, thus making them visible to the audiences worldwide. The Gulf War¹ could be considered a „grey area” as a research topic for historians as it took place not so long ago, so the amount of available secondary material about this topic is very limited. The reason is that documents in the archives in the United States usually remain classified for twenty to twenty-five years. The recent declassification of primary sources will hopefully help to engage scholars in the study of the Gulf War that could give us a deeper insight than the television broadcasts currently available.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a theoretical framework, a sort of introduction to those wishing to study the details of the war. The recounting of the

¹ There is no consensus as to the name of this conflict incorporating the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq and the UN coalition military response between August 1990 and February 1991. Mostly it is referred to as the Gulf War, but the names Iraq War (later used to refer to George W. Bush's offensive launched in 2003), First Gulf War or Persian Gulf War also exist. In Iraq this conflict is remembered as the Mother of Battles. Throughout my paper I shall use the most widespread name, the Gulf War.

events alone could unfold the probable reasons and interests hidden behind the actual manifestations. The first part of my paper shall provide a brief summary of the history of Kuwait and its relationship to Iraq in the past centuries because the official explanations of the invasion of Kuwait are deeply rooted in their common history. The second part will analyze the diplomatic exchanges and events leading to the invasion with a special focus on the infamous Saddam Hussein – April Glaspie meeting, a central element of my research. This meeting provides evidence of the manipulative techniques used by the Americans to control further developments. The third major part of the paper shall summarize what the invasion of Kuwait actually was in its physical reality when a small country is attacked by the world's fourth biggest army. The responses of the United Nations to the events unfolding in the Middle East with the refused Iraqi proposals to prevent a military conflict will then be described with the subsequent military intervention by the United Nation coalition, which was biggest of its kind since World War 2.

By way of summing up the study, based on developments I will support my thesis being that the United States has always had the need to exert a strong influence over the Middle East primarily due to its vast mineral oil reserves. In the context of the events of 1990 America could see no other way but to preserve this influence by military intervention, while leaving Iraq under the reign of a dictatorial and brutal Saddam Hussein only to counterbalance the power of an openly malignant Iran.

The History of Kuwait and its Relations to Iraq

Kuwait is one of the smallest countries in the Middle East², consisting of nine smaller islands. Kuwait was established in the early eighteenth century when the clans of the Anaiza tribe migrated from Saudi Arabia to the Persian Gulf. The clans were united and called themselves Bani Utub. Legend has it that when they arrived in the territory of Kuwait they found a fortress there built by earlier settlers of the Bani Khalid tribe³. The Arab name for a fortress is „Kout“, probably the origin of the name Kuwait.

The Bani Utub tribe became the leading political force of Kuwait, however separation of the classes within the Bani Utub tribe could also be observed. The Al Sabahs were at the top of the hierarchy and this class controlled the desert trade routes through which goods from India to the Mediterranean were continuously being transported. With the increasing economic influence, the Al Sabahs gained power and has been ruling Kuwait till the present day.

Strange as it may seem, but Kuwait was one of poorest states in the region after its foundation, since the desert was poor in natural resources. Later it was

² As for comparison, its size is roughly equal to the territory of the US state New Jersey

³ The Bani Khalid was a small tribe that controlled the region but they did not use the sea for their economic advantage

discovered that the sea provides the possibility to grow pearls. Pearl trade rapidly developed and became the most important product of Kuwait, thus the country came to be called the Pearl of Persian Gulf.

In the nineteenth century Kuwait along with other countries in the Persian Gulf was threatened by the Ottoman Turks. The small and militarily weak country sought the help of Britain in order to avoid Ottoman rule. In January 1899, the ruler Sheikh Mubarak Al Sabah – „*the Great*” – signed an agreement with the British Empire. The treaty concluded that present and future rulers of Kuwait shall not cede any territory nor does it receive representatives of any foreign power without the consent of the British Empire in exchange for protection and an annual subsidy.⁴ Under British rule pearl trade prospered until the 1920s, when artificial pearl cultivation was invented and Kuwait lost most of its markets. After a brief economic decline, a huge mineral oil reserve was discovered under Kuwait in the 1930s that contains an estimated ten percent of the oil reserves of the world⁵, making it one of the largest exporters of mineral oil. Kuwait gained its full political and economic independence from the British in 1961.

Although politically not united, Kuwait and Iraq belong to the same geographical unit. The Northern border of Kuwait with Iraq was drawn based upon an agreement with the Turks in 1913, and Iraq accepted this borderline in 1932 when it became independent from the Ottoman Empire. However, with the discovery of mineral oil, Iraq started to make claims of Kuwait on the grounds that Kuwait was part of the Ottoman Empire and is inseparable from Iraq. Iraq recognized Kuwait's sovereignty in 1963 at the cost that it became a landlocked country. The *status quo* of a large desert country deprived of its seaports neighboured by a small, but extremely rich state controlling the sea held the seed of a conflict in the future.

In 1979 Saddam Hussein rose to power in Iraq, a strong albeit cruel leader. One year later in the neighbouring Iran following a *coup* an Islam extremist group led by Khomeini took over the control of the country. For fear of the strengthening radical Islam ideology of the region, Saddam waged war against Iran and decided that Khomeini should be expelled from Iran. The war was an eight-year-long bloodshed, the finances for which were provided by Kuwait to Iraq, amounting to billions of dollars. The Khomeini regime expressed open antagonism towards the United States, thus the US supported Iraq with political and financial resources. The war ended unsuccessfully for Iraq and left its mark on the Iraqi economy.

In this context Kuwait demanded that the loans given to Iraq should be paid back. Outraged, Saddam refused claiming that Kuwait has always belonged to Iraq. Moreover there were accusations against Kuwait of exceeding the OPEC quota of oil extraction thus robbing markets from Iraq amidst the Iraq-Iran War and also of slant-drilling in the Rumaila oil fields. Slant-drilling is a technique of oil-extraction

⁴ <http://globaleedge.msu.edu/countries/kuwait/history>

⁵ According to the CIA Factbook, Kuwait currently has an oil reserve of 96 billion barrels (1 barrel = 159 litres)

in which from the drilling tower the pipes run diagonally to the underground oil reservoir. Saddam accused Kuwait that this way the oil was stolen from Iraqi territory at the borderline of the two countries.

The Saddam Hussein – April Glaspie Meeting

Given the political climate described above, Saddam Hussein met April Glaspie, ambassador of the United States to Iraq on 25th July, 1990 in Baghdad. During the meeting Saddam Hussein criticized American foreign policy with regards to their attitude towards Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, the two main economic opponents of Iraq. A peculiar part of the negotiation about the border dispute between Iraq and Kuwait could be the key to the upcoming invasion. For a full comprehension I provide the transcript of this part of the negotiation in full length.

U.S. Ambassador Glaspie – I have direct instructions from President Bush to improve our relations with Iraq. We have considerable sympathy for your quest for higher oil prices, the immediate cause of your confrontation with Kuwait. (pause) As you know, I lived here for years and admire your extraordinary efforts to rebuild your country. We know you need funds. We understand that, and our opinion is that you should have the opportunity to rebuild your country. (pause) We can see that you have deployed massive numbers of troops in the south. Normally that would be none of our business, but when this happens in the context of your threats against Kuwait, then it would be reasonable for us to be concerned. For this reason, I have received an instruction to ask you, in the spirit of friendship – not confrontation – regarding your intentions: Why are your troops massed so very close to Kuwait's borders?

Saddam Hussein – As you know, for years now I have made every effort to reach a settlement on our dispute with Kuwait. There is to be a meeting in two days; I am prepared to give negotiations only this one more brief chance. (pause) When we (the Iraqis) meet (with the Kuwaitis) and we see there is hope, then nothing will happen. But if we are unable to find a solution, then it will be natural that Iraq will not accept death.

U.S. Ambassador Glaspie – What solutions would be acceptable?

Saddam Hussein – If we could keep the whole of the Shatt al Arab – our strategic goal in our war with Iran – we will make concessions (to the Kuwaitis). But, if we are forced to choose between keeping half of the Shatt and the whole of Iraq (i.e., in Saddam's view, including Kuwait) then we will give up all of the Shatt to defend our claims on Kuwait to keep the whole of Iraq in the shape we wish it to be. (pause) What is the United States' opinion on this?

U.S. Ambassador Glaspie – We have no opinion on your Arab- Arab conflicts, such as your dispute with Kuwait [SIC by me, B.K.]. Secretary (of State James) Baker has directed me to emphasize the instruction, first given to Iraq in the

1960's, that the Kuwait issue is not associated with America. (Saddam smiles).⁶

As it could be concluded from the transcript, April Gaspie assured the Iraqi leader of non-intervention even in case of a military invasion of Kuwait. Later several journalists inquired from Gaspie about the American government's true intent with this meeting, but Gaspie or any other high officials refused to give a straight answer. The remarks were sufficient to encourage aggression and eight days later, on 2nd August, 1991 Saddam Hussein launched his troops to invade Kuwait.

Invasion

After the meeting with the American ambassador, Saddam Hussein was certain he could deal with the border dispute with Kuwait as he feels fit.

The immediate (and artificially created) cause for launching the troops was an Iraqi offer of \$10 billion having to be paid by Kuwait for the oil stolen from Rumaila oil fields by slant-drilling. Kuwait refused and made an offer of \$9 billion. This offer was coined in the framework of a set of talks held in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, mediated by Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak on behalf of the Arab League⁷ on 31st July, 1990. The response to this was immediate invasion on 2nd August.

Iraqi troops crossed the border and soon reached Kuwait City, the capital. The city was bombed and the almost non-existent Kuwaiti resistance was soon broken, and the city fell twelve hours after the start of the attack. As for comparison of who the two opponents were, the figures are telling. The Kuwaiti troops included approximately twenty-thousand personnel and less than a hundred aircraft, while the Iraqi army was the fourth biggest army in the world that time comprised of nearly a million standing men, almost five thousand tanks and more than eight hundred aircraft and equipped with chemical, biological weapons and presumably other weapons of mass destruction (nuclear bombs).

During the largely unequal battles, Kuwait fell very quickly and by the 8th August a puppet government, known as the Provisional Government of Free Kuwait, was set up in Kuwait and the governor became Ali Hassan al-Majid⁸. The

⁶ Transcript of the Meeting Between Iraqi President, Saddam Hussein and U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, April Gaspie. – July 25, 1990 (Eight days before the August 2, 1990 Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait). Source: www.globalsearch.ca

⁷ Arab League, a popular name for the League of Arab States, formed in 1945 in an attempt to give political expression to the Arab nations. The original charter members were Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Transjordan (now Jordan), Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. A representative of Palestinian Arabs, although he did not sign the charter because he represented no recognized government, was given full status and a vote in the Arab League. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was granted full membership in 1976. Other current members include Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Eritrea (pending in 1999), Kuwait, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Somalia, Sudan, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates. Source: <http://www.infoplease.com/encyclopedia/history/arab-league.html>

⁸ He was later a key character in the breaking down of the Kurdish uprisings, using chemical weapons and torture for retaliation, thus he was given the nickname „*Chemical Ali*”.

Emir and government managed to escape and found shelter in Saudi Arabia.

Diplomatic responses to the invasion

As news of the invasion spread rapidly around the globe, the answer was immediate. The United Nation's Security Council's meeting was summoned at the request of Kuwaiti and US delegates on the day of the invasion. The Council passed UN Resolution 660 that: 1. Condemns the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait; 2. Demands that Iraq withdraw immediately and unconditionally all its forces to the positions in which they were located on 1 August 1990; 3. Calls upon Iraq and Kuwait to begin immediately intensive negotiations for the resolution of their differences and supports all efforts in this regard, and especially those of the League of Arab States; 4. Decides to meet again as necessary to consider further steps to ensure compliance with the present resolution.⁹

As Saddam Hussein did not comply with the demands of the resolution and withdrew his troops from Kuwait, the UN Security Council reconvened and passed UN Resolution 661 on 6th August that placed economic sanctions on Iraq as it „Determines that Iraq so far has failed to comply with paragraph 2 of resolution 660 (1990) and has usurped the authority of the legitimate Government of Kuwait.”¹⁰. On 25th August UN Resolution 665 was passed that enabled a naval blockade to implement the economic sanctions laid down in UN Resolution 661. The text said:

*1.[The UN]calls upon those Member States co-operating with the Government of Kuwait which are deploying maritime forces to the area to use such measures commensurate to the specific circumstances as may be necessary under the authority of the Security Council to halt all inward and outward maritime shipping in order to inspect and verify their cargoes and destinations and to ensure strict implementation of the provisions related to such shipping laid down in resolution 661 (1990);*¹¹

In response to UN resolutions 660 and 661 Saddam Hussein made three proposals to prevent a military conflict on the international scale. The first was dated 13th Aug, 1990, in which Hussein proposed to resolve the issue of Kuwait under the following conditions:

Preparation for an immediate and unconditional Israeli withdrawal from occupied Arab lands in Palestine, Syria and Lebanon; a Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon; mutual withdrawals by Iraq and Iran and arrangement for the situation in Kuwait. All military withdrawals and all related political

⁹ UN Resolution 660. Source: <http://daccess-ods.un.org/TMP/7689256.66809082.html> .

¹⁰ From UN Resolution 661. Source: <http://daccess-ods.un.org/TMP/490663.573145866.html> .

¹¹ UN Resolution 665, paragraph 1. Source: <http://daccess-ods.un.org/TMP/600877.515971661.html>

*arrangements should take into consideration Iraq's historical territorial rights and guarantee the Kuwaiti people's right to decide on their future*¹².

The United States refused this proposal, since Israel is one of her most important allies in the Middle East and it also threatened with the outcome that the US would lose its influence over the Kuwaiti oil markets in the unlikely event that the population of Kuwait voted for unification with Iraq.

The second proposal was sent to National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft on 23rd August by an unknown Iraqi official. The document contained that „*Iraq has told the White House it will withdraw from Kuwait and allow foreigners to leave, but in return it wants United Nations sanctions lifted, guaranteed access to the Persian Gulf and sole control of an oil field that dips into Kuwait, according to sources involved in the secret offer and memoranda detailing its content.*”¹³ President George Bush coined the proposal negotiable but insisted that Iraq should pull out of Kuwait and release all Prisoners of War before any negotiations would begin, so this offer was also refused.

The third offer was made in December 1990. The journal *Washington Bureau* published about it in the following way:

*Iraq has offered to withdraw from Kuwait if the United States pledges not to attack as soldiers are pulled out, if foreign troops leave the region, and if there is agreement on the Palestinian problem and on the banning of all weapons of mass destruction in the region, U.S. officials disclosed yesterday. Although the White House immediately dismissed the proposal as inadequate since it contains preconditions for a pullout, other government officials described it as "interesting" because it drops previous claims to two Kuwaiti islands and a portion of an oil field, and because it signals Iraqi interest in a negotiated settlement.*¹⁴

As none of the proposals were taken into consideration, Saddam Hussein also attempted to influence the public by blackmail and threats. On 23 August, Saddam appeared on state television with Western hostages to whom he had refused exit visas. In a video, he asks a young British boy, Stuart Lockwood, whether he is getting his milk, and goes on to say, through his interpreter, „*We hope your presence as guests here will not be for too long. Your presence here, and in other places, is meant to prevent the scourge of war.*”¹⁵

Military Actions

The United Nations did not find any diplomatic means to resolve the crisis in the Persian Gulf but to deploy a joint coalition force to the Persian Gulf for the liberation of

¹² <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/08/13/world/confrontation-in-the-gulf-proposals-by-iraqi-president-excerpts-from-his-address.html>

¹³ Knut Royce. *Newsday* (Combined editions). Long Island, N.Y. Aug 29, 1990. pg. NOPGCIT.

¹⁴ Knut Royce. *WASHINGTON BUREAU Newsday*. (Combined editions). Long Island, N.Y. Jan 3, 1991. pg. 05

¹⁵ http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/august/23/newsid_2512000/2512289.stm

Kuwait. The coalition was created by a series of UN Resolutions, the most important of which was UN Resolution 678, passed on November 29th, 1990. It gave a final deadline for Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait (15th January, 1991) and allowed to use any force that is necessary to implement and uphold UN Resolution 660.

The coalition was formed comprised of thirty-four countries¹⁶, out of which the United States troops made up of nearly three quarters of all troops. The biggest financial contributions were made by the United States and Saudi Arabia respectively.

In order to justify the intervention in the eyes of the public, an extensive propaganda started abroad, sponsored chiefly by the Kuwaiti government. Broadcasts, flyers and articles were published that told about the monstrosities committed by Iraqi soldiers against civilians in Kuwait. The cost of the propaganda amounted to millions of dollars and reached the campuses of several US higher educational institutions. Although there is no point in denying that Iraqi troops did commit war crimes during the invasion of Kuwait, there were elements of it that were later revealed as fabrication. A most peculiar example was the case of a testimony made by a young woman in front US Congressmen claiming that Iraqi soldiers burst into a hospital in Kuwait City, tore the infants out of incubators and let them die on the floor. Later it was proved that the woman was the daughter of Kuwait's ambassador to the United States and at that time she was in America, so the story cannot be true.

Although it is not my purpose at this point to engage in the military history of the Gulf War, I shall summarise the most important and interesting events of the military intervention. The war began on 17th January, 1991 with the aerial bombing campaign preceded by a military build-up in the Persian Gulf (codenamed Operation Desert Shield). The campaign itself had the widely known codename of Operation Desert Storm. Firstly, the mostly remote controlled aircraft bombed the air force facilities in Iraq, in the capital, too. Some witness said that during this time Saddam Hussein was continuously being driven around the city of Baghdad in a taxi so that his location could not be identified.¹⁷

In the second step, the air campaign was targeted on communication facilities in Iraq, including TV towers, radio stations and the main communication cable lines. The goal was to separate Iraqi troops from their commanders by disrupting all lines of communication. The coalition used state-of-the-art aircraft and weaponry, most of them remotely controlled from operational tents on the ground. Because of this the Gulf War is often nicknamed „*Video Game War*“. Iraqi anti aircraft defences included man-portable air-defence systems and the infamous Scud missiles. Scud missiles were medium range missiles launched from concealed trucks in the deserts, so their location

¹⁶ The Allied coalition consisted of 34 countries, including Afghanistan, Argentina, Australia, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Canada, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Honduras, Italy, Kuwait, Morocco, The Netherlands, Niger, Norway, Oman, Pakistan, Poland, Portugal, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, South Korea, Spain, Syria, Turkey, The United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom and the United States. Source: <http://web.archive.org/web/20080317110507> <http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2001/gulf.war/facts/gulfwar/>

¹⁷ Frontline – The Gulf War – an in-depth examination of the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf crisis. VHS. PBS, 1996.

was very difficult to identify. Saddam gave the order to launch these missiles to the territory of Israel, hoping to provoke retaliatory actions. As a response Israel used the Patriot missiles provided by the US, but due to the long range the aiming was inaccurate, so it did more harm to the coalition forces than to Iraqi troops. The US government asked Israel not to retaliate.

In February, the ground coalition troops stationed in Saudi Arabia quickly advanced into Kuwait and after a few days' of battle, the capital, Kuwait City, was liberated and Iraqi Troops began withdrawing. Between 26th and 28th February Iraqi soldiers marched along the highway towards the Iraqi border, applying the scorched earth tactic. It meant that they aimed to cause as much destruction as possible while withdrawing, setting hundreds of oil wells on fire and causing an oil spill in the Gulf from a tanker ship. It resulted in a severe environmental catastrophe, an oft-forgotten heritage of the Gulf War. Coalition troops kept attacking the withdrawing army, killing thousands of them, so these two days are remembered as the "Highway of Death" in Iraq. As a non-conventional fighting technique, it is interesting to mention the so-called "Bulldozer Operations". The Iraqi soldiers hiding in war trenches were buried alive by the powerful tanks of coalition forces.

By 28th February, 1991 all Iraqi troops left Kuwait, the liberation was complete. There were smaller advancements into the territory of Iraq, but George Bush decided not to invade the country. A ceasefire agreement was signed, Saddam Hussein stayed as the president of Iraq and on 10th March, 1991 UN troops started withdrawing from the Persian Gulf.

Conclusion

In sum, the result of the Gulf War was a liberated Kuwait, where the US-friendly government was restored to its original position. The integrity of Iraq remained intact, even the openly undemocratic and cruel Saddam Hussein stayed in power and continued to commit monstrosities like the brutal treatment of Kurdish people and the use of biological and chemical weapons.

In light of the events; the misleading Gaspie remarks assuring Saddam Hussein he could deal with the border dispute by force without having to fear any international intervention and the blunt refusal of all three Iraqi proposals together with the large amount of money invested in the propaganda for intervention combined with the revealed falsities led me to the conclusion that this war was in the interest of the USA to be fought in order to uphold the influence on the vast mineral oil reserves of Kuwait, while George Bush decided not to invade Iraq, since Saddam Hussein was a strong (albeit cruel and dictatorial) leader, and his country alone could sustain the power relations in the Middle East, counterbalancing an Iran openly malignant towards the United States and the Christian World.

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¹⁸ All of the online sources were accessed between 1st September and 30th November, 2013.