

the Kuwaiti Crisis

Hooshang Amirahmadi*

The Iraqi invasion and annexation of Kuwait in August of 1990 and the U.S. military intervention along with other Western and Arab forces in the crisis has ushered in a new period in the long and turbulent history of the Middle East. What will result from this first major post-Cold War crisis remains largely unpredictable. It is generally understood that the consequences, particularly in light of the military confrontation, will be dramatic for the Middle East and for the emerging world order. "The Middle East will never be the same again" is a fact that is acknowledged by both the advocates of the status quo and those who wish to see democratic changes as a result of this crisis. The one force that will have a determining role in and a critical impact on the situation is the United States.

This article focuses on U.S. Middle East policy in the wake of the Kuwaiti crisis, indicating its objectives (stated and otherwise), probable direction, and impact on the region and beyond. I will conclude with a few remarks on a more objective U.S. policy for the region. I argue that the U.S. response to the Kuwaiti crisis indicates certain shifts in objectives but the policy continues to remain largely reactive and oblivious to

utilize the U.N. more fully and is based on negotiation principle.

Traditionally, U.S. Middle East Policy has been based on four pillars: 1) containing alleged Soviet expansionism; 2) assuring the flow of inexpensive oil to the West; 3) protecting the security of Israel; and 4) preserving the status quo by supporting conservative and anti-Communist regimes. The guiding policy principle was, however, the "Soviet threat." In the wake of the Iranian revolution in 1979 and the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan, President Jimmy Carter declared the Middle East a region of "vital interest" to the U.S. The doctrine continues to guide U.S. policy in the Middle East, but the ingredients of the vital interest are changing. Specifically, in the post-Cold War period, while the Soviet threat has diminished, U.S. Middle East policy has sharpened its focus on oil and countering unfriendly regional powers. This is also seen as a test of a new American paradigm of world leadership in the post-Cold War period. We are also witnessing a gradual return to what was once called "the Nixon doctrine" as indicated by talks about the formation of a new regional security alliance. "The Carter doctrine" called for direct U.S. military response to external threat (that is the Soviet threat) to the Middle East and was in essence based on a "balance of power" conception. The Nixon doctrine, on the other hand, called for reliance on regional powers (sub-imperialists) for policing the Persian

determined by monopoly pricing not by the market forces. Rather, they have become increasingly sensitive to transformations in the structure and level of demand in the West, including Japan. Thus, the oil glut caused by Saudi and Iraqi overproduction in 1979-80 could not prevent a major price hike while a lesser glut in 1985-86, caused by Saudis and Kuwaitis, depressed the price of OPEC oil significantly in 1986. Contrary to the widespread belief, OPEC in the 1980s has largely been a price-taker rather than a price-maker. Additionally, no single state in the Middle East, including Iraq and Saudi Arabia, has the capability to influence the oil market in the future. To effectively use oil as a weapon, no fewer than three or even four major OPEC producers must be able to coordinate their actions and succeed in intimidating others. The economic and political realities in the Middle East will not permit this to happen. The July (1990) OPEC meeting was able to raise the price not because of Iraq's threat to use force against Kuwait, but because most OPEC members, including Saudi Arabia, were disturbed by the sharp decline in oil prices in the preceding months. It had declined to as low as \$13 a barrel while OPEC's benchmark price was \$18 a

inc
oil |
The
Per:
two
the
per
Eas
inte
that
The
exai
of t
also
owr
that
hav
the
pru
Mic
of tl
shai
are:
TI
U.S
ing.
sou
righ
tens
rael
able
indi

meantime, the chronic fiscal deficit, trade imbalance, and savings and loan crisis have led to a huge public debt, making the ailing American economy even more sensitive to higher oil prices and other unexpected external shocks. Thus, the "vital interest" has increasingly become defined in terms of assuring the uninterrupted flow of inexpensive oil made possible by preserving the dominant role of Saudi Arabia within OPEC. The U.S.'s overreaction to the Kuwaiti crisis is partly explained on the basis of this concern.

Yet, the threat to the flow of inexpensive oil is exaggerated. Iraq, for example, is a country with enormous economic problems and can hardly afford to use the "oil weapon" against the West, its main customer. On the contrary, Iraq needs to sell oil at an increasing volume to maintain its huge dependent army, import food, and reconstruct its war-devastated economy. This is also true of other countries in the Middle East, particularly those more or less hostile to the U.S. These nations compete to export more oil and OPEC's main problem over the last decade has been to regulate overproduction. Indeed only

n to
iev's
the
alist
sin-
U.S.
idea
The
dea
ted
the
only
licy
s no
. In
a of
ber,
'ac-
an
d a
The
ken
on.
nk-
ind
cti-
nic
ex-
the
l a

Incidentally, President Saddam Hussein's real power originates from his popularity among a sizeable segment of the disenfranchised, poverty-stricken and humiliated Arab masses. Yet, they are as useless to the pan-Arabist Saddam Hussein as they were to Pan-Arabist Gamal Abdul Nasser in 1967, for they are divided into 21 pieces throughout a disunited Arab world and he is not known to most of them as a champion of the have-nots. Besides, most politically active members of the Arab masses belong to Islamic movements in the region and they well know that Saddam Hussein is a secular man with little devotion to Islam as an ideology of the modern state. Indeed, Iraqi war against Iran was partly motivated by President Hussein's opposition to Islamic Republic's attempt to export its Islamic Revolution to the region. President Hussein's call for a "holy war" and a proposal on (August 12, 1990) to withdraw from Kuwait in return for an Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories only indicates how desperately he needs the Arab masses for his survival in the current crisis.

It is also important to note that Iraq

into Syria, Jordan, or Saudi Arabia. None of these options can be taken with any degree of seriousness under the prevailing conditions in the region. President Hussein may be tough-minded but he is surely not stupid or mad! Brandishing him as a Hitler of the new age is just too far fetched to be taken seriously by any student of politics or history. He may have a similar mentality but hardly has the same means to back it up. Israeli security is being challenged by no other force but the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, hardly a "high tech" military force. The *Intifada* (uprising) there has shaken the foundations of Israeli politics and continues to undermine the state's legitimacy at home and in world opinion.

Israel's interest is best served by agreeing to a two-state solution to the conflict and by withdrawing from the occupied territories. Peace in the region serves Israel better than it does the perpetuation of hostility with the Arabs. The Kuwaiti crisis has for the first time placed the U.S. directly between the belligerents and thus should have created more incentive for the Americans to effectively arbitrate the conflict. Despite attempts to the con-

tracting the attention of the world from the Arab masses, the coalition with the U.S. is a necessary step to ensure the survival of the Arab masses in the current crisis.