

## The 1990 Gulf Crisis: Political Realism Applied

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### Abstract

*This article investigates the decisions behind the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. There are many theories and approaches that can be used to interpret wars within the international system. Realism is selected here to provide the analytical framework with which to explain the Iraqi invasion. Although there are many general propositions of realism regarding the international system, three main propositions are focused upon to help explain the Iraqi invasion. The first assumption of realism applied in this article is the notion that states pursue their national interest defined in terms of power; second, external forces, rather than internal factors, determine states' foreign policy; and third, rationality explains states' behavior.*

**Key words:** International Relations; The Middle East; Political Realism, Iraq; Kuwait; The Gulf War 1990; Saddam Hussein.

### ***The Gulf Crisis: Political Realism Applied***

Theories are essential in every discipline to explain, comprehend, and interpret reality and the world. Political scientists have formulated some theoretical approaches with which to explain, among other things, international power relationships, war, and economic growth.

Today, some of the main theoretical approaches of international relations are idealism, realism, neorealism, liberal institutionalism, the capital world economy, and postmodernism. In my study of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, I have selected realism as a tool with which to investigate the problem. I found that realism best explains the crisis because it focuses on military power and it emphasizes national interests. In my case study, I am explaining the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait primarily using traditional realism. The main point I am asserting in my research is the realist argument that nations use power to pursue their self-interests.

### ***General Assumptions of Realism***

Realism, also known as political realism or realpolitik, is one of the dominant schools of thought within the field of international relations. It has a long intellectual history, dating at least from Thucydides' (460-400 BC) history of The Peloponnesian War. The writings of Niccolo Machiavelli (1429-1527) and Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) provide other notable examples.

In recent history, and mainly after World War I, realism emerged in its modern form largely in reaction to idealism, an approach that emphasized a legalistic approach to international relations and focused on international law and organization to implement peace and harmony among states.

The generation of realists writing immediately before and after the Second World War, shared an essentially pessimistic view of human nature, reflecting their time of conflict and wars among great powers. Now we referred to them as the classical realists. They believed that the struggle for power was inherent in human nature and that the sole basis of all international relations was the struggle to optimize states' power.

An important assumption of realism, according to John Herz, is that the nature of world politics is anarchic (Herz, 1957) (i.e., there are no rules to govern states, unlike domestic politics, where hierarchy enforces laws and agreements). This notion of realism means the absence of any central authority with the ability to provide for the security of individual states. Therefore, each state must provide for its own security, and must act in its own interest (without regard to any other concerns), and expect other states to behave in the same manner (Herz, 1957).

The modern state system, which has been considered anarchic by realists, is defined by unequally distributed power and on the deficiency of a higher (supranational) authority. Its units, the independent sovereign nation-states are forever threatened by stronger powers. No state can be secure in its borders from the ambitions of other states and can survive only precariously through the system of a balance of power.

Another realist, Martin Wight, stresses the assumption that states are the dominant actors in world politics (Wight, 1978; Waltz, 1979).

While both private actors, such as multinational corporations, and intergovernmental organizations, such as the UN, exist and influence international politics, realists assume they are subordinate to states. Accordingly, private entities and intergovernmental organizations act within the political arena, but they do so only with the consent of national political authorities.

Realism stresses the assumption that the essence of politics is the competition for power and that international politics is best understood in terms of the conflict that arises from this struggle. Power is understood in terms of political, economic, and physical power. It includes geography, natural resources, economic capacity and military preparedness. In E. H. Carr's opinion, power can be a means, an end, and a vital factor. Also Carr agrees that economic power cannot, and should not, be divorced from politics, and that economic forces are political forces (Carr, 1939).

### ***The Three Assumptions of Realism***

From the general assumptions of realism, I am applying three major assumptions to the Iraqi invasion because they most clearly explain Iraq's policy toward Kuwait. First, I am applying the realist notion that states act to pursue their national interests. Second, external powers determine state's foreign policies. Third, states' decision-makers behave as rational actors in their efforts to influence others.

A major theme of realism is the notion of national interest. Realists argue that national interest is the interest of the state, and it is defined in terms of maximizing power, in that the pursuit of national interest is dependent upon the power available to implement the nation's policy (Conter, 1976). Accordingly, the primary obligation of the government is to the interests of the national society it represents.

George Kennan states that the idea of interest is understood by the realists as the essence of politics and Herz emphasizes that it is unaffected by the circumstances of time and place (Kennan, 1986; Herz, 1951). Hans J. Morgenthau quotes Max Weber that, "Interests, not ideas, dominate directly the actions of men," and assumed that nations ignore the national interest only at the risk of destruction.

Also, Morgenthau asserts that the first task of foreign policy is to seek the defense of the national interest by peaceful means. The second task is the defense of national interest against the national interest of other nations. According to Morgenthau, the concept of the national interest presupposes neither a naturally harmonious, peaceful world, nor the inevitability of war as a consequence of the pursuit by all nations of their national interest. Quite to the contrary, it assumes continuous conflict and threat of war to be minimized through the continuous adjustment of conflicting interest by diplomatic action (Morgenthau, 1990). Wight argues that in a world of independent sovereign powers, war is the only means by which each of them can, in the last resort, defend its vital interests.

Realists reject the role of ideology as a determining factor in politics, especially international politics. According to realists, ideology serves either as a veil to disguise or as a moral wrapping to legitimize the pursuit of power (Fozouni, 1995). According to Morgenthau, ideologies are manifestations of the struggle for power. Also, Carr regards all international ideologies as a "mere cloak for national policy" (Carr, 1964). For realists, ideologies either camouflage actors' power strategies or provide a rationalization for their actions; they are a means to political action, not an end.

Second, realists also assume that external forces, rather than internal factors, determine the foreign policy of the states. They emphasize that the international environment largely determines states' action. Accordingly, all states and the individuals responsible for formulating their foreign policies similarly approach the problem of adapting to the challenges posed by the world beyond their borders, not within them (Kegley & Wittkopf, 1997). In addition, most realists put a sharp distinction between domestic politics and international politics (Vasquez, 1983).

The third assumption of realism is that states' or their official decision-makers' behavior can be explained and predicted on the basis of the rational-actor model. Rational means the ability to reason and act upon the results of deliberation. An action is rational to the extent that it is correctly designed to maximize goal achievement. To be rational, then, is to be efficient in the pursuit of goals. Accordingly, the decision-maker responding to international events supposedly makes decisions in cool and clear headed calculations. Realists treat the state as a unitary rational actor which calculates costs of alternative courses of action and which seeks to maximize its expected utility. The individual decision maker makes a decision based on clearly defined intellectual processes of clarified values and goals (Vasquez, 1983; Morgenthau, 1990). The aim of the rational act is to serve the national interest.

Now I will examine the Persian Gulf crisis of 1990, which began when Iraq accused Kuwait of hurting Iraq through its oil policy and climaxed with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in early August 1990. I will utilize the three main concepts of realism-- states pursue their national interest as defined in terms of power, the crucial role of external powers in the decision-making policy, and the rationality of foreign policy decision-making to apply to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

### ***Iraq's National Interest and Power***

According to realism, states act to pursue their national interest in maximizing their power. Here I present this realist assumption and develop some evidence to link the invasion to Iraq's national interests. Realists believe that the sole basis of all international relations is the struggle among nations to optimize their power. Realists maintain that every state has a natural geopolitical sphere of influence whose domain reflects the state's power potential relative to those of other states. The state is concerned with its national interest and power, especially if its power is in decline and it is trying to ensure its survival and integrity for the material well-being of the state.

Thus, if a state is geopolitically under extended in influence level, it will inexorably adopt an imperialist foreign policy" in order to optimize its power (Fozouni, 1995). Due to the eight-year Iraq-Iran war, which was fought partly in reaction to the Shi'a Islamic revolution in Iran and its interference in Iraq's national affairs, Iraq was ruined and faced with an acute economic crisis. The country was desperately short of money due in part to the decline in oil prices from 20 to 14 dollars per barrel between January and June, 1990. Estimates in early March 1990, prepared by foreign bankers with access to some of Iraq's finances, suggested that the country was going to be short 8 billion dollars during the year, assuming that all payments were made. This deficit was more than half of what Iraq was expected to earn that year from oil (Henderson, 1991). Indeed, Iraq did default on some of its debt payments.

Therefore, Iraq emerged from the Iraq-Iran war a crippled nation. Economists' estimations put the cost of reconstruction at 230 billion dollars. Even if all Iraqi oil revenues were put toward reconstruction of the country, it would have taken at least 20 years to rebuild Iraq.

Also, Iraq needed an extra 10 billion dollars annually in addition to its annual oil revenue to cover its expenses of 12 billion dollars of civilian imports, 5 billion dollars of military imports, 5 billion dollar debt repayment, and billions of dollars transferred outside Iraq by foreign workers to their families (Karsh & Rautsi, 1991). In addition, the Iraqis were suffering serious shortages of many basic commodities. During 1989, difficulties grew over Iraqi attitudes toward the one million or so Egyptians working in Iraq as Iraqi soldiers were demobilized and began to seek employment. The tension escalated into violence and some Egyptians were killed in disputes over employment.

The decline in oil prices had increased the burden on the Iraqi economy, as oil exports consisted of 98 percent of total Iraqi exports. Iraq did not have the capital to pay for its development plans. The Iraqi government did not have a serious plan to reduce dependency on oil and to use oil revenues to build a strong economic infrastructure to reduce imports of industrial and agricultural products. The country's heavy international debt had reached 80 billion dollars. Saddam admitted during his meeting with the U.S. Ambassador April Glaspie days before the invasion that "Iraq came out of the war burdened with 40 billion dollars in debt," excluding Arab states' loans (Bengio, 1992). Iraq had had 37 billion dollars in reserve before its war with Iran. Moreover, Iraq had to pay 3 billion dollars in interest payments. Iraq was not able to pay these and it tried to re-schedule some of those debts (Sutherland, 1992). Iraq needed economic growth that produced jobs to enable it to demobilize its military; but the Iraqi economy was unable to absorb 200,000- 300,000 soldiers (Marr, 1991).

After the invasion, the Iraqi Foreign Minister, Tariq Aziz, made a clear connection between the economic crisis and the action Iraq took against Kuwait because of its policy “against” Iraq. He claimed that the acute economic problems of Iraq were due to what he said was the Kuwaiti action of flooding the world market with oil which brought down oil prices and of stealing Iraqi oil from the disputed border area. Also, he mentioned that Iraq’s budget required seven billion dollars for debt service, leaving Iraq with only the money to get basic services. This Kuwaiti action proved, in his mind, that Kuwait was not interested in any change of its aggressive policy toward Iraq.

He stated that “we were desperate and could not pay our bills for food imports. It was a starvation war against Iraq;” therefore, Iraq used its military force to survive (Musallam, 1996). Aziz suggested that Iraq’s debt to its fellow Arabs should be written off. In addition, it was reported that during an Arab summit meeting on February 25, 1990, Saddam asked President Mubarak of Egypt to tell the Saudis and the other Gulf nations that he needed 30 billion dollars in fresh cash. “If they don’t give Iraq this money, we will know how to get it” (Sutherland, 1992).

Iraq wanted money badly for its survival and for its struggle for hegemony in the Gulf region. Iraq’s policy of prioritizing the weapons development program, the execution of a journalist working for a London newspaper, the violation of human rights in Iraq, including the use of chemical weapons against the Kurds, and the potential threat to Israel, put Iraq at odds with the developed nations. The credit, which the West had been prepared to extend, was reduced during 1989 and 1990 and resulted in a worsening of the economic situation. Failure to secure adequate external help to fund Iraq’s economy and reconstruction probably opened the door for Iraq to look to Kuwait.

The West, especially the U.S., was concerned about Iraq’s power in the region and possible threat to Israel, the U.S. strategic ally in the region. In addition, Iraq failed to reach agreement with some American and Japanese companies to lease the rich oil area of Majnoon Island near the Iranian border because of the risk of the location (Tareeq al-Sha’ab, 1991).

When national interest is understood as ensuring the physical survival and integrity of the state and to look after the material well-being of the state, Iraq did what was necessary to preserve its power by claiming Kuwait which it considered historically to be a part of present-day Iraq. Therefore, faced with this crisis situation, to promote its perceived national interests and to strengthen its eroding power, Iraq claimed rich Kuwait to control its oil and wealth. Kuwait was described as a sea of oil, being third in the world in reserves of crude oil and one of the world’s top producers. It was one of the richest countries per acre and per capita in the Middle East and in the world. Kuwait had roughly 100 billion dollars in overseas government assets and about half that much in the hands of Kuwaiti citizens. Moreover, about 15 to 30 billion dollars of Iraqi foreign debt was owed to Kuwait. By occupying Kuwait and its oil reserves, Iraq would have controlled the second largest oil reserve in the world, following Saudi Arabia. Iraq would have used Kuwait’s enormous oil wealth to build a strong state, pay its debts, and to meet its military requirements to be a stronger regional power.

Iraq also wanted to influence the world price of oil to increase its income. By occupying Kuwait, more than 20 percent of OPEC’s total output would be in Iraqi hands. Also, Iraq would intimidate Saudi Arabia, the Gulf’s largest producer of oil. Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Kuwait ranked first, second, and third, respectively, in proven oil reserves as of January 1990.

Their resources totaled nearly 450 billion barrels of oil, or 45 percent of the world's known reserves (World Almanac, 1991). Moreover, a new, powerful Iraq would intimidate other Gulf countries to forgive their loans to Iraq, made during its war with Iran.

One could make the case that Iraq was possessed with the notion of power to pursue its national interest. According to respected Iraqi economist Abbas Alnasrawi, Iraq's military spending absorbed 75 percent of its oil income by 1980. Iraq's spending in subsequent years amounted to several times the country's oil revenue. Between 1981 and 1985, during the first years of the war with Iran, military spending amounted to 199.9 billion dollars, or 245 percent of the oil revenue in the same period. This deficit was financed by foreign loans (Alnasrawi, 1994). In the war year 1981, for example, arms expenditures had totaled 14 billion dollars, and increased annually in the following six years. Between 1985 and 1988 Iraq had bought 10 percent of all arms purchased worldwide (Joffe, 1991). In 1988, the year the Iran-Iraq war ended, Iraq spent about 40 percent of its export earnings on the military (Marr, 1991). Although the war had ended in 1988, Iraq spent over 10 billion dollars on its military in 1989, which consumed over 20 percent of Iraq's gross national product. Moreover, Iraq's official defense budget figure for 1990 was stated to be \$13.3 billion (Sutherland, 1992).

Western intelligence and strategic defense institutes affirm that Iraq's weapons development program included chemical and biological weapons, and it was working to produce nuclear weapons. Iraq was testing a satellite-launching rocket and trying to develop a long-range weapons delivery system. By most accounts, Iraq wanted acknowledgment of its power, respect, and to be a regional nuclear power. Its power could be used against an old enemy such as Iran or even against Israel.

To maximize its power and enhance its national interest in the Gulf, Iraq saw in Kuwait a way to compensate for the disadvantage of being virtually landlocked. Iraq has just 18 miles of shoreline, and most of that was blocked by Kuwait's Bubiyan Island. When Iraq failed to control the Shatt al-Arab waterway during the war with Iran, it tried to press Kuwait to lease Iraq the island so that it would have a wider geographical area to protect its main port, Basra. Iraq was afraid of the Islamic regime of Iran and wanted to have expanded seashore to facilitate its trade and to strengthen its naval power in the Gulf. Iraq had growing economic and strategic interests in the Gulf and also had a desire to develop a deep-water port there.

The Kuwaitis refused the Iraqi offer, fearing a permanent loss of the island to Iraq. The Iraqi port of Umm Qasr, close to the border with Kuwait, became of great importance in providing an outlet to the Gulf. The two islands of Warbah and Bubiyan similarly controlled access to Umm Qasr. Instead of capturing only these two islands, Iraq strengthened its power by occupying a weak Kuwait itself. Speaking in support of this strategy, Saddam claimed that "Iraq did not want to expand its land but to affirm that Iraq is a Gulf country capable of defending itself and its Arab brothers against any foreign threat" (Kuwait University, 1979).

Hammadi, the Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister, emphasized the importance of expanding Iraq's access to the Gulf. He said that Iraq was almost landlocked and it was very easy to block its narrow waterways in time of an emergency. Also, Hammadi stated that those Iraqi ports' capacity rose from 16 million tons to 26.5 million for imports and exports (FBIS, 9-11-1990). After the invasion, Iraq expanded its access to the Gulf from 60 kilometers to 362. The pursuit of national interest is dependent upon the available power to implement the state's policy (Conter, 1976).

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait meant expansion through its military strength. An imbalance of military power between Iraq and Kuwait facilitated the invasion. Iraq had a population of 18 million, and a one million-member regular army. It had 670 combat aircraft, 3700 artillery, 90 rocket launchers, 5500 battle tanks, more than 7000 armored personnel carriers, an air force of more than 500 planes, and 160 armed helicopters. In contrast, Kuwait, with a population of 1.9 million, had an army of only 20,300 personnel, 275 tanks, 90 artillery, 30 combat aircraft and 18 armed helicopters (Marr, 1991).

In sum, Iraq was concerned with its military and economic power which was declining due to its war with Iran and the drop in world oil prices. Almost all of Iraq's income came from oil. To get into a better position in the Gulf, to expand its sea shore and land, and to use Kuwait's wealth to build a strong state, Iraq invaded Kuwait and annexed it, utilizing an historical claim.

### ***The Role of External Powers***

A realist characterizes the international environment as hostile and dangerous; it follows that a state's behavior is analyzed from the perspective of that environment. Forces external rather than internal to the state are regarded as the major determinants of foreign policy (White, 1989).

A realist interpretation of the crisis would point to the fact that Iraq stressed that an outside force, Kuwait, was undermining Iraq's power and security. Iraq had a similar claim and experience with Iran when that country started interfering with Iraq's internal affairs. Despite the end of the Iran-Iraq war, the Gulf region was insecure because there was no permanent peace. In May 1990, at a closed session of the Baghdad Arab Summit, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein spoke on the oil policy of OPEC.

He pointed out that there was a lack of adherence to OPEC quotas by some "Arab brothers" which caused confusion in the oil market. He accused them of flooding the world market, which caused a drop in oil prices to sometimes as low as seven dollars per barrel. Saddam stated that for every one dollar drop in the price of a barrel of oil, Iraq lost 1 billion dollars annually. He emphasized that war was not only fought by soldiers and explosions, but also by economic means. "This is, in fact, a kind of war against Iraq. We have reached a point where we can no longer withstand any pressure," Saddam warned (FBIS, 7-19-1990).

Also, on July 17, 1990, Saddam, speaking on television, harshly criticized unspecified states for exceeding their oil production quotas. Tension rose the following day when Saddam accused Kuwait of having stolen 2.4 billion dollars worth of Iraqi oil from the Rumaila oil fields on the southern border with Kuwait. He accused Kuwait and the United Arab Emirate (U.A.E.) of stabbing Iraq in the back by increasing the production of oil above their agreed quotas, thus bringing down the price of oil. He demanded that Kuwait and the U.A.E. pay compensation to Iraq for its losses. He asked OPEC to raise the price of oil from 18 to 25 dollars a barrel. He also strongly warned Arab and foreign governments not to interfere in the dispute between Iraq and the two Gulf States, Kuwait and the U.A.E (FBIS, 7-17-1990).

The Iraqi Foreign Minister, Tariq Aziz, then announced to Ghedi Klibi, the Arab League Secretary-General that Kuwait should not only cancel Iraq's war debt, but also compensate Iraq for losses incurred during the war and as a result of Kuwait's over-production of oil. In addition, Aziz accused Kuwait of having violated its border by erecting military posts and drilling oil wells in Iraqi territory (Middle East and North Africa, 1991).

The Iraqi letter to the Arab League identified Iraq with the Arab side and Kuwait with others, meaning outside forces that were conspiring against the Arab nation. Iraq wanted to make the issue only an Arab one and insisted that bringing foreign parties to deal with the issue would be considered evidence of Kuwait's conspiracy against Iraq.

The Iraqi leadership believed in a conspiracy theory that Kuwait and the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) were working together to destabilize Iraq and to hurt its economy because of Iraq's support for the Palestinian cause and its power that could be used as a deterrent to Israel (FBIS, 7-18-1990). Iraq had distrusted the U.S. policy ever since Irangate, when during President Reagan's administration, some U.S. officials made a secret contact with Iran for arms during the Iran-Iraq war in order to acquire the release of the American hostages from Lebanon.

The enemy portrayed by Iraq was the outside world. At that time, a campaign was launched by the Western press against Iraq's gross human rights violations and use of chemical weapons against the Kurds. The campaign culminated in a program in Arabic by the director of Voice of America attacking the Iraqi government for its record of human rights abuses. Also, U.S. State Department annual human rights reports assailed Iraq for human rights violations. In addition, the U.S. Congress passed a resolution aimed at preventing certain commodities from reaching Iraq, while the British authorities confiscated the shipment of the Iraqi supergun. Therefore, the Iraqi leadership concluded that there was a conspiracy to undermine Iraq's power.

The issue of Kuwaiti oil production flooding world markets made the Iraqi leadership certainly thinks of the external powers' capacity to harm Iraq and concluded that the West was treating Iraq as a new danger in the region.

The well-known Egyptian writer, Muhammad Hassanayn Haykal, in his book, Illusions of Triumph: an Arab View of the Gulf War, argued that the Iraqi leadership genuinely believed that the U.S., U.K., and Israel were part of a plan to "destroy" Iraq (Musallam, 1996).

It seems that Iraq was preoccupied with and influenced by its ideology and fear that imperialists sought to destroy the emerging Arab power that was Iraq. Also, according to Haykal, Saddam was told by a friendly head of state of a western decision to treat Iraq as a new threat in the region (Musallam, 1996). Therefore, Saddam, in his "Revolution Day Speech" on July 17, 1990, accused Kuwait and the U.A.E. of becoming puppets of the imperialist-Zionist interest which wanted to conquer the Arab world" (FBIS, 7-19-1990).

During the invasion, Iraq published a document allegedly discovered in Kuwait of a week of meetings between Kuwaiti officials and U.S. officials, including the director of the C.I.A., in November 1989. The document stated, "We agree with the American side that it is important to take advantage of the deteriorating economic structure in Iraq in order to put pressure on the Iraqi government to delineate our common border" (Swinger, 1996). I do not know how authentic this document is in order to examine the Iraqi claim.

However, President Saddam Hussein, during his meeting on July 25, 1990 with April Glaspie, the U.S. Ambassador in Baghdad, criticized the U.S. for advising Gulf States to fear Iraq and to refuse any economic aid to it. Saddam emphasized that certain parties in the U.S. were contacting Gulf States and encouraging them to fear Iraq. He criticized the U.S. for thinking that the situation in Iraq was like Poland, Romania, or Czechoslovakia, and Saddam was disturbed by this "campaign."



Saddam was occupied with the notion that external powers were undermining Iraq, including the U.S. He told the U.S. Ambassador that he could not understand the U.S. attempt to encourage some parties to harm Iraq's interests. He threatened that "we do not accept that anyone could injure Iraqi pride or the Iraqi right to have a high standard of living." Iraq published this information as an official transcript of the meeting.

In fact, during 1988 and 1989, world oil prices (between 13 and 16 dollars per barrel) remained well below OPEC's proposed price level of 18 dollars per barrel. The price of oil dropped from 19.98 dollars per barrel to 14.02 dollars per barrel by June, 1989. This was about a 30 percent drop, which took out a major portion of many countries' revenue, including Iraq. Kuwait and the U.A.E. were over-producing oil. The U.A.E. produced an average of 300,000 barrels above quota. Kuwait, however, produced 500,000 barrels above its quotas of 1 million in 1988 and 1.5 million in 1989. Officially, Kuwait claimed that its action was necessary to maintain low oil prices to avoid energy switching in the oil-consuming states if the prices were high.

In February, 1990, the Kuwaiti Oil Minister, Ali Khalifa al-Sabah, admitted that "we are producing above quotas at the moment....I think that our obligation to stay within the quota applies when the prices of OPEC are below 18 dollars per barrel." Iraq, according to George Joffe, believed that the "primary purpose of Kuwait was to weaken the Iraqi economy and to block Iraq's ability to play a regional role in the Gulf" (Joffe, 1991; Alnasrawi, 1994). This is an important causative factor in the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Iraq's irritation over debt repayment demands from Kuwait had intensified its suspicions that Kuwait was trying to weaken its economy. However, none of these accusations could justify the invasion of Kuwait.

There are other methods of solving any international problem in accordance with international law. The use of force is permitted under U.N. charter only in the case of defending the country in case of an attack.

Kuwait probably misread Iraq's seriousness. Writing about Iraq's future, Phebe Marr thinks that Kuwait misinterpreted the situation and "renege[d] on an earlier promise to reduce production and to compromise on the Rumaila situation." The matter escalated when Kuwait reminded Iraq of its debts to Kuwait (Marr, 1991). This Kuwaiti policy aggravated Iraq and pushed Saddam to order the invasion, in conjunction with other reasons.

Iraq considered the loans given it by the Gulf States as assistance, not debt. Saddam and other Iraqi officials indicated that Iraq fought Iran on behalf of the Arab states; without Iraq the region would have been dominated by Iran and the Gulf States would have lost their sovereignty or money in the confrontation. When the Gulf States refused the Iraqi suggestion, Saddam was angered.

Iraq also sent envoys and letters to some Gulf States and told Arab kings and presidents during the Arab summit in Baghdad of the "economic war" against Iraq. Iraq emphasized that if its army's capability was lowered, if Iran renewed war, it could achieve its goals against the Arab nation; also, Israel could be encouraged to attack Iraq. For these reasons, Saddam's patience was running out and he made it clear to Gaspie that he would not accept this situation. In addition, Aziz considered Kuwait's and the U.A.E.'s actions as a direct act of "aggression against Iraq," and, using an Arab-nationalist term, "against the Arab nation" (Rezun, 1992).

In the world arena, the U.S. policy was not clear regarding Iraq's policy toward the Kuwait.

Indeed, Iraq might have misperceived the U.S. stand and thought the U.S. would not react to an Iraqi action against Kuwait.

Just prior to the invasion, U.S. officials stated that the U.S. was neutral on the question of whether Iraq's claim against Kuwait was valid. The U.S. Ambassador to Baghdad, April Glaspie, gave Saddam the impression that the U.S. had no wish to be embroiled in an inter-Arab conflict, thus perhaps giving Saddam the green light to invade Kuwait. "We have no opinion on Arab-Arab conflicts like your border disagreement with Kuwait," Ambassador Glaspie told Saddam on July 25, 1990. According to an Iraqi transcript, she had direct instructions from President Bush to strengthen and expand the scope of relations with Iraq. Glaspie did not admonish him when Saddam told her, "If we are unable to find a solution, then it will be natural that Iraq will not accept death" (Joffe, 1991; Darwish & Alexander 1991; Alexander, 1990). This lack of response could have been part of Glaspie's diplomatic mission. She may have had no authority to warn Saddam without direction from Washington.

In the meeting, Glaspie mentioned that the U.S. Secretary of State, James Baker, had directed U.S. official spokespersons to emphasize that the U.S. had no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflict. In addition, Glaspie stated, according to the Iraqi manuscript, that Iraqi massive deployment in the south was not "any of our business" but that it would be "reasonable for me to be concerned" (FBIS, 7-19-1990). Pierre Salinger, in response to the nature of the U.S. policy toward Iraq immediately before the invasion, writes that Bush did not try to stop Iraq from invading Kuwait. The U.S. gave Saddam, in his opinion, a green light message to invade (Salinger, 1995). Also, P. Edward Haley wrote that the U.S. and the West armed Iraq and encouraged Saddam to believe he could conquer his neighbor without much of a response (Haley, 1995).<sup>46</sup>

In my opinion, the U.S. policy was not to mislead Iraq into invading Kuwait.

On the contrary, U.S. officials asserted on many occasions their willingness to improve relations with Iraq to serve its national interests.

The American policy toward Iraq misled Saddam to act contrary to international norms. Even when Iraq used poison gas against the Kurds in 1988, many American officials did not want to anger Saddam and wanted to improve American relations with Iraq to serve American interests. Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, Richard Murphy, saw that the U.S.' condemnation of Iraq's use of chemical weapons would shake U.S.-Iraqi relations. "We need to move quickly to ensure that our action is seen as anti-chemical weapons, not anti-Iraq" (Karabell, 1990). Murphy wanted to improve relations with Iraq for the "long-term political and economic U.S. objectives for the Gulf and beyond" and to influence the Iraqis.

Although Glaspie claimed that the Iraqi transcripts were fabricated and miss-informative, the State Department declined to comment on the accuracy of the Iraqi transcript of the meeting between Saddam and Glaspie, though privately officials said that it was "essentially correct" (Sciolino, 1991). Also, two weeks before the Iraqi invasion, the State Department spokeswoman said that "we do not have any defense treaty with Kuwait, and there are no special defense or security commitments to Kuwait" (Bullock & Morris, 1991). These statements were made at a time when the Iraqi troops were marching toward the Kuwaiti border, giving Saddam the impression that the invasion would be a low-risk act. In addition, John Kelly, Assistant Secretary of the State Department, stated on July 23, 1990 that "we have historically avoided taking a position on border disputes or internal OPEC deliberations" (Bullock & Morris, 1991).

Despite Saddam's outrages against human rights and his extraordinary military buildup, in 1989, the U.S. had extended 500 million dollars in credit guarantees for export of agricultural commodities to Iraq. In 1989, U.S. exports to Iraq totaled 1 billion dollars (Cox, 1990). Only three days before the Iraqi invasion, on July 29, 1990, the administration of President George Bush opposed trade sanctions against Iraq as punishment for its violation of human rights. The U.S. State Department said the sanctions would not help achieve U.S. goals in Iraq or its national interests (Ross, 1990). Once again; these statements were probably taken by Iraq as facts or as official U.S. policy on the crisis. Iraq was encouraged by the U.S. apparent policy of non-intervention.

Despite apparent American neutrality, it has been suggested by some Arab intellectuals as well as some Iraqi opposition that the U.S. may have set up a trap for Iraq, tricking it into invading Kuwait. Although Saddam served American interests in the area by fighting Iran and by eliminating its threat to Western interests, as well as weakening the strong Iraqi Communist Party, the U.S. did not want a competing power in the region. The Iraqi power could threaten U.S. interests and its strategic ally, Israel, especially after Saddam declared that he would burn half of Israel if it attacked Iraq. Further, the U.S. was wary of reports that Iraq was trying to obtain capacitor devices for triggering nuclear weapons, and that the British had seized a shipment to Iraq of superguns capable of firing nuclear or chemical weapons hundreds of miles. This claim that Iraq was trapped suggests that once Iraq invaded Kuwait, the U.S. could then take direct military action to eliminate the threat of an Iraqi nuclear buildup. These ideas are mainly forwarded by Arabs who oppose the U.S. policy. They voice that the emergence of a powerful Iraq after its perceived victory over

Iran affected the balance of power in the region, particularly the balance between Iraq and Israel.

Therefore, the emerging crisis could have been partially attributed to the West's actions, given its desire to bring Iraq into line and to protect Israel. This view is unrealistic because the U.S. and the West had good relations with Iraq. The U.S. Administration was trying to improve its relations with Iraq and to convince Iraq to play a positive role in the Middle East peace process. In addition, the U.S. and the U.N. were working to find a diplomatic solution to the crisis and gave Saddam a last chance to withdraw from Kuwait and avoid war. If the U.S. wanted to destroy Iraq, it would not have exhausted all peaceful opportunities to end the crisis.

The realist assumption that the international system is anarchic manifested itself in the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Although the U.N./U.S. action was close to world government in its reaction to the Iraqi invasion, as Kenneth N. Waltz put it, "structure (international structure) operates as a cause" that "conditions the acts of states and influences outcome" (Waltz, 1979). Foreign policy makers usually respond to objective obstacles abroad to adopt reasonable policy. Because of the nature of the international system, there is no mechanism to force states to abide by international laws and regulations. There is no authority to enforce laws as there is in the case of national government. Therefore, it was easier for Iraq to invade Kuwait.

In sum, external powers, in this case Kuwait, the U.A.E., and the U.S., helped shape Iraq's policy of invading Kuwait. Kuwait's oil policy of flooding the world market which threatened Iraq's power, Kuwait's exploitation of the Rumaila oil field on the border, and its demand that Iraq's debt be repaid triggered the invasion.

### **Rationality of Iraq's Decision-Making**

As stated before, realism assumes that decision-makers act rationally when making decisions or when responding to other nations' decisions.

Accordingly, rationality as foreign policy decision making always denotes optimizing one's power. Therefore, it is irrational for any state to do other than maximize its power potential, and thus, the rationality of power maximization is a product of the system (Morgenthau, 1990).

Although it is debatable, realists believe that decision-makers responding to international events base their responses upon cool and clear-headed calculations and act as unitary rational actors. The decision-makers use the best information available and choose from the universe of possible responses the option that is most likely to maximize goals. Other arguments assert that decision-makers are influenced by other factors and act not as unitary actors.

Thus, states seek to maintain or expand power through military force, diplomacy, and geopolitical strategy. Also, states (or their decision makers) act in a rational manner as a unit when they perceive that the expected gains outweigh the expected losses. Power relations among nation-states are considered as the major reason behind warfare. Accordingly, when power resources (military, economic, demographic, etc.) show uneven growth among states, dominant states with declining capabilities see a threat to their security and may instigate aggressive action against challengers.

Through the realist perspective, one can argue that the Iraqi decision-makers who knew and planned the invasion acted rationally to pursue their national interests. They defined their objective of annexing wealthy Kuwait using nationalism and history to cover their pursuit of power. Their aim was to maximize Iraq's power and to cope with threats from abroad.

During the annexation of Kuwait, Iraqi officials stressed how much power, oil, and oil reserves Iraq now had to make them a powerful state.

Realists assume that state decision makers produce alternative options to deal with a crisis to maximize the state's benefit. Therefore, Iraq had to make a cost-benefit analysis of its invasion of Kuwait. It expected that victory would result from military action and that military success would bring desirable consequences. It depended on the available information that the U.S. would not interfere in an Arab-Arab dispute as U.S. Ambassador Glaspie had told Saddam during the meeting between them immediately before the invasion; or, Iraq thought that if the U.S. were to interfere, it would be a limited intervention or ineffective economic sanctions.

In an interview, Hussein Kamel, the Iraqi Defense Minister during the invasion who later defected to Jordan, pointed out that the Iraqi decision-makers calculated the worst scenario and concluded that the U.S. army would not enter Baghdad in an intervention because their casualties would be larger than if they were merely firing missiles from a distance (Time, 1995). Or, Iraq might have calculated that a direct American response could be coped with (Matthews, 1993). Iraq could have calculated that in the post-Vietnam era, the U.S. intervention would be limited for the reason that Americans would not risk their lives for Kuwait. A book entitled The Generals Are the Last to Know, by Saad al-Bazzaz, a defected Iraqi official, stated that after the meeting with the American Ambassador, Saddam underlined with his pen all of Glaspie's statements that asserted that the U.S. was not interested in any Arab-Arab dispute and wanted them to solve their problems among themselves (Al-Bazzaz, 1996).

Even Saddam, in an interview with the Turkish newspaper *Hurriyet*, complained that “they had said that they would not intervene.” Regarding his meeting with Glaspie, Saddam said that Glaspie told him that the U.S. did not want to be involved in an inter-Arab dispute.

His reply was, “we do not want you to be involved either” (FBIS, 2-13-1992). Also, Saddam might have calculated that the U.S. would not topple him because the U.S. was afraid that Iraq would break down into states in line with ethnicity or religious sects. Toppling Saddam, as many U.S. circles advocate, will cause civil war in Iraq and instability in the region. The southern part could ally with Iran, and a Kurdish state in the north will affect Turkey’s stability, where millions of Kurds live and struggle for their national rights. The U.S.’ policy after the war prefers overthrowing Saddam through a military coup (a palace coup) rather than through a popular uprising, fearing that revolution would break down the Iraqi state structure, causing civil war and instability in the region.

Also, Iraq was rational not to employ weapons of mass destruction against the allies during the Gulf war because it feared that the U.S. would retaliate with nuclear weapons. James Baker, then the Secretary of State, told his Iraqi counterpart, “God forbid . . . chemical or biological weapons are used against our forces. The American people would demand revenge.” He thus implied the use of nuclear weapons (Arkin, 1996).

Part of Iraq’s rational act was that it planned to gain the support of Iran or at least its neutrality toward any Iraqi action. Iraq took into account Iran’s struggle with the U.S. and its unfriendly relations with the Gulf States. Therefore, Iraq adopted an anti-Western and pro-Islamic propaganda policy. Iraq adopted the mantle of Islam, emphasizing Islamic values, symbols and slogans.

During the crisis, Iraqi planes took refuge in Iran to avoid U.S. attack and destruction. Also, Saddam wanted to create an Arab-Islamic bloc against the U.S. and Israel. In addition, months before the Iraqi invasion, Iraq demanded that American naval forces leave the Gulf. These actions were to facilitate Iraq’s policy toward Kuwait.

To face international reaction and to gain popular Arab support, Saddam launched many initiatives designed to free Iraq from its isolation and to divert world attention to other issues, such as the linkage plan to withdraw from Kuwait if Israel withdrew from the occupied Arab territories in Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon. Iraq claimed that if this withdrawal took place, it would reconsider its policy toward Kuwait but wanted the world to take into consideration its historic rights “in its territory,” meaning Iraqi rights to at least some of the Kuwaiti land. Also, to escape isolation and gain some world support, Iraq announced a promise of free Iraqi oil to all third world countries. All these steps toward gaining Arab and international sympathy were done in addition to the Iraqi rational policy of trying to gain popular support at home by promising people a better living standard and solving their internal problems.

Although rationality is desirable, it does not guarantee success as in the case of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. When decisions are made without accurate information, leaders draw wrong conclusions and alternatives, regardless of how rational they seem. It is difficult to assess all pertinent information and to consider all relevant options and alternatives and their consequences. Decisions often fall short of the ideal. In the case of the Iraqi invasion, Saddam tested the U.S. actions before the invasion by observing their lack of reaction to his troops’ movements.

In deploying his troops to the Kuwaiti borders, he gave the U.S. an opportunity to deter him; also, he gave that opportunity when he met with U.S. Ambassador April Glaspie or through monitoring U.S. official statements about the situation. As senators and the U.S. Ambassador told Saddam, the U.S. policy was to improve relations with Iraq because of Iraq's role against Iran and the latter's radical anti-Western policy in the world.

In fact, Glaspie never really made it clear that the U.S. would not tolerate an aggressive act on the part of Iraq. The U.S. needed Iraq for its oil, as a consumer of U.S. commodities, to contract with the U.S. to reconstruct Iraq after its war with Iran, and for Iraq to play a role in the Middle East peace process.

### **Conclusion**

In short, realism has been used here as a useful tool to interpret the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Despite the successful role of realism in explaining policy, it fails to account for all aspects of Iraq's decision making. Although external forces played an important role in Iraq's decision to invade Kuwait, they were not the only factor in the determination of Iraq's policy. There were internal factors in Iraq that facilitated the decision to invade Kuwait, such as Iraq's internal economic and political problems, history of an Iraqi-Kuwaiti dispute, uniqueness of Saddam Hussein as a dominant leader, the role of the Ba'ath pan-Arab ideology, etc. Also, it is hard to be sure that Iraqi decision-makers acted rationally to pursue their national interest because the outcome of the invasion was not in favor of Iraq and played a distinctive part in the weakening of Iraq's power.

The problem of rationality here is that we do not know Saddam's real objective, so we do not know if he acted rationally or not. Saddam had an extremely large impact on Iraq's policy.

I think that even if Iraq was faced with the same external threats and internal problems but had a different leader than Saddam, there would have been no decision to invade Kuwait. Saddam was irrational in some stages when he was looking for his own self-interest in having prestige and becoming better known in the world arena. He thought he could face the whole world and inflict large casualties on the American forces.

There are ways in which individual decision-makers diverge from the rational model. One factor is misperception or selective perception (Goldstein, 1997). Saddam might have taken in only partial information regarding the consequences of invading Kuwait. He may have simply ignored any information that did not fit his expectations. Second, the rationality of individual cost-benefit calculations is undermined by the emotions that decision-makers feel while attempting to determine the consequences of their actions. Saddam's decision process might have been influenced by his strong feelings about the Kuwaiti rulers and their actions against Iraq. Also, cognitive biases distort rational calculations; when knowledge contains undesirable elements, a person may ignore certain pieces of information that he or she possesses (Goldstein, 1997).

A state leader such as Saddam will very likely adjust his mental model to downplay the risks and exaggerate the gains of the chosen course of action, or he may simply overestimate the probability of a desired outcome. All of these psychological processes may have interfered with the rational assessment of costs and benefits in making the decision to invade Kuwait. Although it is difficult to assess the impact of a political leader on the foreign policy of his or her nation, the power of a national leader flows in part from the nature of the state's political system. Generally, those who come to power through a constitutional process are constrained by precedent, prior commitments, and the domestic political climate.

Totalitarian leaders have more room to maneuver in foreign policy (Brown, 1984; Rourke, 1995). The Iraqi case is an example of how a predominant, totalitarian leader imposes his will in the making of his country's foreign policy.

The Iraqi decision-makers did not believe that the U.S. and its allies would strike Iraq, and they might have thought that a deal could be struck with Iraq which would save face for Saddam.

The Soviet envoy to Baghdad during the crisis, Yevgeni Primakov, wrote in his memoirs that Saddam Hussein thought up until the last moment that the allied forces would not attack Iraq.

Primakov wrote that the Iraqis told him that when George Bush suggested that Iraqi and American foreign ministers meet, Saddam told them that the Soviet Union was scaring them by saying that a U.S. strike was inevitable, but he felt the events were following a different scenario (Asharq al-Awsat, 1991).

In sum, and despite its critics, realism continues to provide us with useful tools to analyze states' foreign policies, especially with regard to the Iraqi decision to invade Kuwait.

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