Policy Failure and Unipolarity on the Eve of Operation Desert Storm

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In this essay, I examine the build up to Operation Desert Storm (17 January 1991–28 February 1991), the war waged by a United States (US)-led coalition of 35 states against Iraq, arguing that its causes can be divided into *primary* and *secondary* factors. The primary cause, Iraq's decision to invade Kuwait, should be viewed as the triggering factor, whereas the three secondary ones, namely the ambiguous United States (US)–Iraq diplomatic relations at the time, Gorbachev's "new thinking" approach and the almost non-existent opposition from Near Eastern countries, were all instrumental either in speeding up the decision-making or in creating consensus around the campaign.

In the first section I address the primary cause for Desert Storm, giving a background on Iraqi economics and politics before Saddam's decision to invade Kuwait together and its implications for the region. Then, I turn to the secondary causes. First, I illustrate US–Iraq diplomatic relations at the time, with specific reference to the infamous Glaspie cable, arguing that ambiguity on the part of the United States might have increased Saddam's confidence and therefore accelerated his decision to invade Kurawi. Subsequently, I look at the USSR, pointing out how its identity crisis triggered by the 1989 revolutions gave rise to the "unipolar moment" (Krauthammer, 1990) in international politics, which removed Soviet opposition to military intervention. I then focus on the Near East, where, because of a complex interplay of strategic interests, strong public support for Saddam was thwarted by national governments, which either remained neutral or chimed in the criticism of Iraq. I argue that this unexpected development helped building consensus around the righteousness of the Gulf War.

In the conclusion, I argue once more that both primary and secondary causes of the war need to be examined in order to make sense of the unprecedented support enjoyed by the Coalition in the run up to Operation Desert Storm.

Saddam's Decision

The first, most relevant aspect to consider is the direct cause of the military campaign, i.e. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. After the Iran–Iraq war, Saddam was facing a complex economic crisis and lack of political legitimacy. The massive military mobilisation for the war (Hiro, 1993: 42-3) meant that the Iraqi army was now larger and more difficult to control than before. Conscious that challenges to his power could take place at any time, Saddam resorted to the evergreen patronage system, making sure the most loyal officers were promoted and dangerous ones were "dealt with" appropriately, sometimes disappearing in mysterious "accidents" (Tripp, 2000: 248-49). Another crucial challenge was economic development. An economy reliant on subsidies and imports (as well as on a conspicuous neo-patrimonial network), Iraq needed a constant stream of funds to keep the economy going (Ibid.: 250-51). However, the amount of foreign debt was too high "to keep the wheels of patronage turning" (Ibid.: 250), and liberalisation attempts did not yield the desired effect. Keeping the army busy and justifying economic hardship therefore became Saddam's primary goal. As it turned out, the solution to both problems was waiting at Iraq's south-eastern border.

In Ottoman times, Kuwait was part of the Iraqi province of Baṣra (Adib-Moghaddam, 2006: 62), and since Kuwait's independence, it was not the first time the two countries had come at each other's throats (Hiro, 1993: 9-12). The border between Iraq and Kuwait was never clearly defined (as opposed to that between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia),

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and was instead strategically manipulated by colonial powers to diminish Iraq's commercial capabilities; for example, by denying Iraq a deep-water port up until the late 1950s (Ibid.: 12-15). In 1962, in an attempt to settle the dispute, the Arab League established a Military Patrol Line, a "buffer zone" (Campbell, 1993: 33) which was meant to solve diatribes over land. Nevertheless, Kuwait had violated its neutrality, establishing oil drilling sites more than once since the 1970s, and was only repelled by the Iraqi army (Ibid.).

However, the conflict between the two countries was never only about borders. Under Saddam Hussein, "a youthful, energetic figure [who] appealed to those Baathists who believed in strong ideology and commitment to progressive socio-economic policies" (Ibid.: 26), Iraq aimed at a new hegemonic role in the Arab world. A role which, ideologically and militarily, threatened the Gulf monarchies who were perceived as a corrupt entity across the Arab world. In the months leading up to the invasion, Saddam made two requests to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. First, to abide by OPEC oil quotas as failure to do so was driving down the price of oil in international markets and indirectly waging economic war against Iraq (Karsh and Rautsi, 1991: 21-22), a country whose oil revenues made up 98% of exports (Yapp, 1996: 456). Secondly, to forgive Iraq's $40 billion loan granted during the First Gulf War (Tripp, 2000: 251-52; Karsh and Rautsi, 1991: 21). After both claims were refused, "humbling the oil-rich Arab rulers of the Gulf states" (Tripp, 2000: 252) seemed to be the only logical option to Saddam.

It goes almost without saying that Saddam's invasion plan was met with resistance from several actors. Notably, oil imports as a share of total consumption were extremely high in the First World countries (except Britain) that later joined the Coalition (Bennett, Lepgold and Unger, 1994: 43). If nobody had challenged him, Saddam would have managed to control the majority of the world's oil resources, thus granting himself a far greater say in the politics of the region and in international trade.

Policy Failure: The Glaspie Meeting

On 25 July 1990, eight days before the invasion of Kuwait, Saddam met with US ambassador April Glaspie to "hold comprehensive political discussions" (Sifry and Cerf, 1991: 122). During the conversation, Saddam summarised Iraq's critical situation, highlighting what he perceived as an unfair treatment by the Gulf countries which were backed by the United States. Saddam spoke about Kuwait trying to claim territory near the Military Patrol Line (Ibid.: 124) and his concerns over the falling prices of oil, which would thwart the possibility of adequately funding the Iraqi army, which in turn would expose the country to the possibility of military action by either Iran or Israel (Ibid.: 131).

Glaspie kept an overall friendly tone during the conversation, suggesting Saddam to seek a diplomatic solution to these problems. However, commenting on the Kuwait issue, the ambassador stated that "we have no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts, like your border disagreement with Kuwait", further adding that, as she was serving at the American embassy in Kuwait in the 60s, "[t]he instruction we had during this period was that we should express no opinion on [the Iraq-Kuwait border dispute] and that the issue is not associated with America" (Ibid.: 130). Some have understood these statements as a veiled "green light" to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, or at least suggesting no repercussions in the event of aggression (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2003: 54). Even if the statements do not amount to a *direct incitement*, or even if they were meant (as it has been argued) to suggest a diplomatic reconciliation (Kenner, 2011), the US ambassador failed to convey any intent of deterrence. Her "tepid plea" (Ibid.) was drowned out by the desperate and threatening tone Saddam employed throughout the dialogue, even suggesting that "[i]f you use pressure, we will deploy pressure and force. […] We cannot come all the way to you in the United States, but individual Arabs may reach you" (Sifry and Cerf, 1991: 125). Therefore, the meeting constitutes a "policy failure" (Walt, 2011), as, regardless of intentions, Saddam felt that the United States would have remained, at least, neutral in the event of an invasion.

It has been argued that this hesitant behaviour might have been a reflection of an American "miscalculation". Indeed, it looks like support for Iraq (and its leader) was grounded

on the supposition that the secular-nationalist ideology of the Iraqi regime could be manipulated to the advantage of US interests in the region, underestimating the salience of the anti-imperialist and Ba'thist-Arabist identity of the Iraqi state and the ˈmegalomaniaˈ of Saddam Hussein himself (Adib-Moghaddam, 2006: 56)

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Indeed, one more reason why Saddam might have interpreted those words as an authorisation to employ military force was that the international community, especially the US, did not oppose his war against Iran and neither condemned the treatment of minorities in his own country as in the town of Halabja, where chemical weapons were employed against Kurds and Iranian soldiers (Ibid.: 56-57). In his view, the West was protecting him because he was in turn defending its interests in the Gulf.

Russian Identity Crisis and the Unipolar Moment

Once the invasion had taken place, and Operation Desert Shield was underway, efforts to establish a Coalition began. The US found an unlikely ally in the USSR, which condemned Iraq's actions and supported all subsequent UN resolutions. There is little doubt that this decision was instrumental in framing the conflict as "a just war against aggression" (Rubinstein, 1994: 311). However, particularly fortuitous for the Coalition was Moscow's domestic political climate, which allowed for these developments to take place.

Throughout the 1960s and 70s Moscow had to balance on a "tightrope" (Ibid.: 304), trying to maintain good diplomatic relations (with minor hiccups) with Iraq, Iran and Kuwait. Moscow's initial aim was to infiltrate the Near East through an alliance with the Gulf states, thus limiting the United States' sphere of influence. However, as the First Gulf War broke out, relations with Iran gradually started to deteriorate (Ibid.: 306). When Gorbachev came to power in 1985, his "new thinking" became the main driver of the country's foreign policy. Together with Minister of Foreign Affairs Eduard Shevardnadze, the Soviet leadership sought to bring the United States closer in an effort to break the bipolar world order. This identity crisis is epitomised by several changes between the first two Gulf Wars, namely the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the Warsaw Treaty Organisation and ultimately the independence of Eastern Europe and the demise of the Soviet Union (Ibid.: 309). In this landscape, Gorbachev promoted a new kind of foreign policy, geared towards the "encouragement of negotiated solutions to regional conflicts" (Ibid.: 307), appeasement with the international community and the rejection of ideology. He faced criticism for his choice of siding with the Coalition despite promoting non-military solutions to conflicts, but managed to handle domestic opposition. In the end, he did not get involved militarily (Ibid.: 321) but was still able to benefit from supporting it. The country obtained loans from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE, becoming the most important trading partner for Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Ibid.: 318). Gorbachev also improved his relationship with Iran (Ibid.: 321-22), but most importantly he was able to kickstart the process of détente with the United States (Ibid.: 313).

These historical developments have been theoretically framed under the concept of *unipolarity*. According to Krauthammer (1990), the "unipolar moment" is a post-Cold War condition where there is but "a single pole of world power that consists of the United States at the apex of the industrial West" (1990: 24). Multipolarity (in the form of international consensus) is only a farce, or better a carefully constructed "pseudo-multilateralism" (Ibid.: 25). According to Krauthammer, the United States needs to protect its interests of commercial nation at any cost, and only pays respect to the UN and other countries' authority due to internal pressures (Ibid.: 26). Debates around unipolarity revolve around two theories of international relations, namely *hegemonic theory* and *balance of power theory*. In a unipolar system, the hegemon (the United States after the Cold War) far outweighs any competitor in terms of military and economic power, heavily reducing the likelihood of hegemonic competition and the threat stemming from balance of power politics (Wohlforth, 1999: 23-24). Smaller conflicts located at the periphery, however, can still occur. Monteiro (2011: 12) identifies two possible types of war arising from a unipolar world order, namely a) hegemon against lesser power and b) lesser powers against each other, both deeply linked to the behaviour of the hegemon in the international system. The great power could follow a strategy of either *dominance* (further divided into defensive and offensive) or *disengagement*. From the end of the Cold War up until 9/11, the United States chosen strategy was that of *defensive dominance*, which entails an imposition of the status quo in an attempt at "freezing the global distribution of power" (Ibid.: 23). Since there is no other pole to turn to, minor powers find themselves in a difficult position, having no guarantee of the hegemon's intentions. If trust is broken, they become recalcitrant and face increased pressure to build up their defensive capabilities, including their nuclear arsenal (Ibid.: 26). They may also test the unipole's commitment to maintain the status quo by operating changes that can increase their bargaining power, be it through military conquests or strategic alliances. This in turn challenges the unipole's dominance over the system, potentially leading to other states taking the same pre-emptive measures. Therefore, if calls for the restoration of the status quo are ignored, the only option left is war.

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In the context of the Gulf War, Iraq decided to test the United States' commitment to the balance of power in the Near East, hoping that the invasion of Kuwait would be a tolerable loss for the unipole. In turn, the US had to fulfil its role of a "global Leviathan" (Adib-Moghaddam, 2011: 206), an unchallenged superpower punishing a rascal state for insubordination (Monteiro, 2011: 28) and indirectly intimidating the only other potential threats to the balance of power, namely Russia and China. As was later shown, this latter motive generated exactly the desired effect. Arguably both Russia and China were overwhelmed by the Leviathan's military capabilities. A furious debate ensued among military strategists on whether the Russian economy could afford to keep up with technological innovation, and on which strategic direction the army should prioritise – whether switching to "long-range, precision guided munitions with increased destructiveness" or sticking to a more traditional, ground combat approach (Kaufman, 1993: 376-378). Similarly, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) learned that Iraqi tanks and MiGs (far more sophisticated than their own) did not pose any serious threat to the more advanced and strategically oriented US Army (Farley, 2014). Technological and tactical advancements, such as the shift "from nuclear deterrence to long-range precision strike" (Ibid.), were lessons the PLA was able to learn only thanks to Desert Storm.

In conclusion, the shift in Soviet foreign policy allowed for Desert Storm to take place, removing the biggest obstacle to United States power in the international community, i.e. Soviet opposition. History is not made of hypotheticals, but it is safe to assume that, had Gorbachev sided with Iraq, thus reinforcing the bipolar order, or at least had he opposed military intervention, the Coalition would have had a hard time justifying Desert Storm, if only for the several strategic possibilities it would have opened up for the Arab world.

Strategic Thinking in the Near East

Perhaps the most fortuitous of these secondary causes, however, is the unanimous condemnation of the invasion by Near Eastern countries. It could be argued that consensus around the campaign was boosted by the lack of serious opposition from regional actors. While support from the Gulf countries was obviously determined by the direct threat the invasion posed (especially in the case of Saudi Arabia), other states, despite considerable pressures from the national publics to support Saddam, adopted a more cautious diplomatic approach .

After careful deliberation, Egypt and Syria sided with the Coalition, as they both believed Saddam was unlikely to exit the conflict victoriously. This way, they thought they could gain more from a temporary strategic alliance with the US. Moreover, they both feared Saddam expansionism in the region (Telhami, 1993: 448-49). Syria in particular was suffering from the fading relevance of the Soviet Union and, by supporting the United States, was hoping to get a favourable position in the negotiations with Israel (Hinnebusch and Quilliam, 2006: 517; Goodarzi, 2013: 45). Jordan's approach, on the other hand, was dictated by the strong public support for Saddam (Reed, 1991: 21). Jordanians of Palestinian origin (more than half of the population) shared Saddam's anti-Israel sentiment, and questioned why the United States were concerned with the liberation of Kuwait and not with Palestine (Ibid.: 23). Despite condemning the invasion, Jordan did not take an explicit stand in favour of the war, nor did the country contribute personnel to the Coalition (Telhami, 1993: 448-49). Considerable grassroot support for Saddam took the form of public demonstration in different countries such as Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan and Syria (Piscatori, 1991: 31). The Gulf monarchies were unpopular among Arab countries, seen as a den of "corruption, insincerity, and licentious, un-Islamic conduct" (Ibid.: 28), fighting against the nationalist pan-Arab, anti-Zionist Iraq. Even Islamist groups like Hamas, heavily dependent on Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, saw a resurgence of pro-Saddam sympathy among their ranks (Ibid.: 32).

Outside of the Arab world, fervent parliamentary opposition prevented Turkey from contributing troops to the Coalition, but the US Air Force was allowed to use Turkish bases (Hale, 1992: 686-87). Iran criticised the invasion and applied UN sanctions but remained neutral (Goodarzi, 2013: 45-6). However, what stands out in the Coalition makeup is the lack of direct Israeli involvement. New evidence suggests that Israel's Defence Minister and army chief of staff were very close to launching an air campaign against Iraq in response to the Scud missiles attacks (Ari Gross, 2018). President Bush, fearing that Syria and Egypt would switch sides if Israel got involved, managed to persuade them Israel to stop the campaign.

In conclusion, even before the campaign Saddam knew he could not rely on the Soviet Union for protection. If a

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response was to take place from the US, he thought (perhaps in his Ba'athist spirit) that a united Arab front would have deterred military action (Telhami, 1993: 444). He took a gamble and history ultimately proved him wrong, as even the few states that did not join the Coalition disavowed his actions, leaving him alone against the might of the Leviathan.

Conclusion

As I have pointed out, the Coalition's military intervention against Iraq in 1991 was the result of the interplay of several factors. First and foremost, the war was triggered by Saddam's decision to invade Kuwait. The country's economic crisis after the Iran–Iraq war, coupled with the patrimonial structure of Iraqi bureaucracy, required a constant inflow of liquidity to avoid uprisings and military coups. The drop in oil prices caused by violation of quotas by members of OPEC (Kuwait and UAE above all), resulted in huge revenue losses, prompting Saddam to solve the impasse by military means.

Secondary causes have either sped up the decision to invade Kuwait or facilitated the creation of the Coalition on the eve of the invasion. US diplomatic failures, in part to be blamed on several "misconceptions" about the nature of the Iraqi leadership, convinced Saddam that he would not have faced retaliation by the international community. Moreover, Gorbachev's "new thinking" led to Russia turning its back on Iraq (a former ally) and support the Coalition, hoping to gain political and economic leverage with the US and the Gulf states. Finally, Operation Desert Storm perhaps would have been challenged if it was not for the fortuitous and unlikely unanimity among regional powers, which stemmed from different political and strategic goals and ultimately translated into support for the Coalition. It is not unreasonable to argue that the operation could have been carried out even without such unanimous support; the 2003 Iraq War testifies this. However, as evidence indicates, being the *unipolar moment* at its very start, the lack of support from regional key actors could have created strategic alliances against the Coalition (which arguably was Saddam's goal in trying to get Israel involved), thwarting the whole endeavour before it even began.

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