



www.cemmis.edu.gr

Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East & Islamic Studies

University of Peloponnese

15 January 2012

POINT OF VIEW

Twenty Years Since the First Gulf War

Achievements and Failures

Zaki Shalom*

The decision of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein to invade Kuwait in the summer of 1990 confronted the Bush Administration with a critical test. The question under examination was not merely the valid conquest of Kuwait by Iraq but also the larger issue of the international territorial status quo. Since the end of the Second World War, the international community has been operating under a rather general consensus: The status quo that was created after the war should be accepted by all nations. States might have aspirations to change the existing status-quo. However, any change could be achieved only by peaceful means.

The U.S. administration was well aware that acknowledging the conquest of Kuwait by Iraq might lead to two disastrous consequences. a. Iraq, realizing that its violent move was not met by significant punitive measures, would not be satisfied with the conquest of Kuwait only, and would try to enlarge its territorial expansions to other states in the region, mainly the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia. b. Members of the international community would also conclude that a violent move against other states bears no real risk. Thus, they also would be tempted to carry out aggressive measures against their neighbors. These two developments might certainly destabilize the international community and would have far-reaching consequences not only in the political arena but also on its economic stability.

The U.S. under the Bush senior administration has successfully handled this matter. The United States had a choice of undertaking an appeasement policy towards Saddam Hussein. It had good reasons to choose this option. Saddam Hussein demonstrated deter-

* Prof. Zaki Shalom is a senior researcher at the Ben-Gurion Research Institute, Ben-Gurion University and a senior research fellow at the Institute for National Security studies.

mination and exceptional self-confidence in the months preceding the war. There was also information that he had unconventional weapons in his stockpile. Nobody could disprove this possibility. He made it clear he was determined to achieve his strategic goals and was ready to pay any price needed for that. Furthermore, any military option against Saddam Hussein by the United States could have endangered U.S. forces in the region and also the interests of U.S. allies in the region, such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan.

Notwithstanding these apparent risks, the Bush administration decided not to undertake the appeasing course. It was made clear to the Iraqi regime that the U.S. was ready to make certain concessions that would satisfy the Iraqi leaders but would not in any way acquiesce with the demand of the Saddam Hussein regime to annex Kuwait into Iraqi territory.

On January 17, 1991, the military operation, Desert Storm, began in a huge air strike by the United States against the Iraqi army. The land operation of the coalition forces had begun shortly afterward on Feb 24, 1991. In the beginning of March, Iraq was forced to ask for a ceasefire following the near total crush of its army. The U.S. army had made very wise use of its huge air superiority over the Iraqis. The use of air force had dramatically decreased the number of casualties of American forces. As a result, there was no significant opposition from the American public to the war.

The United States' decision to undertake a military option with the support of its allies had certainly enhanced its credibility and deterrence power. Beyond the operation's success, the First Gulf War was also accompanied by an impressive diplomatic achievement of the United States in at least two aspects:

a. The establishment of an international coalition, which was comprised of thirty-four states including Arab nations who fought against Iraq under the umbrella of the United Nations.

b. The ability of the U.S. to restrain Israel from carrying out retaliation against Iraq following the launching of thirty nine rockets from Iraq to Israeli cities. The Bush administration correctly feared that retaliation by Israel would destabilize the coalition that they worked so hard to establish.

However, in a historical perspective one must emphasize that together with the operational and diplomatic successes, the U.S. also had strategic mishaps whose consequences are apparent even today. The first was related to the fact that the United States refrained from bringing about the downfall of Saddam Hussein during this war. It seems that the Bush administration had abstained from doing so in order to let Iraq be a counterbalance to Iran. It rightly feared that the downfall of Saddam's regime would cause regional instability by increasing the power of Iran.

However, from today's perspective we see that this American assessment was not close to being fulfilled. Saddam Hussein continued to provoke U.S. interests and forced the Americans to go to another war against him, which had been much less successful than the first one. Today, Iraq is a weak state whose stability both in terms of its regime and territorial integrity is in real danger while Iran is much stronger. Its regime seems to be quite stable and is continuing its endeavors to build its nuclear capabilities. Notwithstanding repeated American threats to prevent Iran from achieving a nuclear capability, Iran appears to perceive that the United States is hesitant to cross red lines and to undertake military measures against it.

We may assume, although there is no certainty, that if the United States had undertaken tougher measures to bring about the downfall of Saddam Hussein during the First

Gulf War it would not have needed to enter the “muddy swamp” again in the Second Gulf War. If the United States had demonstrated unshaken determination and decisiveness during the first war, there is a likelihood that the Iranian regime would have hesitated to continue its provocative policy against U.S. interests. Perhaps it would have even decided to refrain from prolonging its nuclear project.

The other U.S. letdown was related to its policy with regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict in general and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular. The Bush administration has backed the argument even after the Gulf War, that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was the main factor in the creation of the lack of stability in the Middle East. It further argued that the resolution of this conflict would bring about a much more stable and peaceful Middle East. This principle has been adapted by all the presidents who followed Bush and is certainly a central axis in President Obama’s Middle East policy.

The practical significance of this erroneous doctrine is that there is almost no possibility to establish an alliance of moderate pro-Western Middle Eastern states against Iran as long as there is no solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There is no doubt that the lack of such an alliance dramatically enhances the power of Iran in both the region and the international community and makes it much more difficult for the U.S. and its allies to struggle against the Iranian nuclear project.

The CEMMIS is launching a new series of articles and analyses ‘Points of view’ which present different angles and opinions on issues in the Middle East and the Islamic world. The authors of these analyses are not part of the CEMMIS analysis group.

The Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East & Islamic Studies posts a multitude of positions in the context of free academic debate. These do not necessarily reflect the positions of the CEMMIS.

