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# Beyond Diversion: Regime Security and the 1990–91 Gulf War

Drew Horne

## Introduction

Whether and to what degree internal threats could indeed lead to external conflict has been the focus of great swaths of International Relations scholarship. In their seminal work on International Relations, Haas and Whiting (1956) argue that state leaders “may be driven to a policy of foreign conflict—if not open war—to defend themselves against the onslaught of domestic enemies” (62). The default explanation for this connection, it seems, has been the widely touted diversionary war hypothesis, which supposes that domestically embattled leaders will seek to divert the public’s ire from their failures by provoking foreign conflicts (see Levy 1989; Oakes 2006; Haynes 2017; Theiler 2018). Such explanations have been used to explain many historical cases despite little consensus on even the most straightforward of these (Fravel 2010). This hypothesis has been perhaps most recently applied to explain Russia’s aggressive foreign policy, including the 2021 military buildup on the Ukrainian border (Theiler 2018; Beliakova 2019; Haass 2021). However, this deeply divided literature fails to provide a cogent examination of the mechanisms behind a supposed diversionary war. Is it the case that citizens will be inclined to support a failing leader whenever she provokes a war when war itself tends to be so profoundly unpopular? (See Myrick 2021)

Promising literature on the unique security challenges developing states face provides a potential alternative to the problematic diversionary hypothesis. Foundational works starting in the late 1980s explored how socio-politically weak states—or Third World states—face different security environments and outcomes than a traditionally conceived international actor with robust domestic institutions (e.g. Thomas 1987; Migdal 1988; Job 1992; Ayoob 1995). These works identify how certain forms

of domestic institutional weakness—power struggles between civilian and military leaders, non-state sanctioned uses of coercive force, disputed borders and ethnol-national violence, etc.—make the regime just as, if not more, susceptible to internal political threats than to external military ones. In a dynamic that Job (1992) and others label the “insecurity dilemma,” ruling elites in weak states are threatened primarily by domestic challenges, including the armed forces, strongmen, warlords, and sometimes popular uprisings of social, religious, or ethnic groups (see Jackson 2010; Hong 2000; Edney 2015). Traditional external military threats are therefore secondary in their effect on regime security. These external threats may become more salient when they exacerbate a preexisting internal crisis. Under these conditions regime security, as opposed to state security, becomes a leader’s overriding concern, creating an environment where internal and external threats interact to produce foreign policy outcomes that diverge from structural realist expectations.

In this study, I operationalize and build on the so-called “insecurity dilemma” faced by weak states to develop a novel “regime security” explanation for the 1990–91 Gulf War. In so doing, I make two significant contributions to the literature. First, my theory sheds new light on the well-worn evidence surrounding the causes of the Gulf War, rejecting explanations that rely solely on traditional military threats, economic constraints, or leaders’ personalities. Second, I develop a compelling second-image framework for analyzing the causes of war among institutionally weak states that does not rely on the diversionary hypothesis.

The paper is organized as follows. First, I present my model of regime security and show how pre-war Iraq fits the definition of a weak state facing a regime security crisis. I then apply this theory to Saddam’s 1990 invasion of Kuwait and subsequent rejection of the U.N. deadline demanding his withdrawal, finding that the domestic vulnerabilities of the regime better explain the conflict than do countervailing neo-realist theories. Specifically, I show that Saddam’s lingering fears of subversion, domestic upheaval, and crumbling legitimacy ultimately drove him to invade and then persist in occupying Kuwait. Finally, I contrast the domestic causes of Iraq’s conflict initiation with the actions taken by a state with robust domestic institutions for which the regime security model should not apply, namely the United States. Instead, I find that the U.S. response to Saddam’s aggression can be well explained by structural realism. This provides essential insight into how strong and weak powers may experience divergent causal drivers toward conflict but arrive at the same outcome: war.

## **Regime Insecurity and Prewar Iraq**

To develop my regime security theory of war, I first define regime security and state strength. As in the Third World Security school tradition, I define regime security broadly as those conditions that promote stability, longevity, and survival of the incumbent ruling body. Although this broad definition encompasses many domestic factors, it will be helpful to think of regime security primarily as the political and physical survival of rulers. When defining stateness (state strength), much of

the literature indicates at least two essential qualities to consider: the integrity of the state's monopoly on the use of coercive force and the legitimacy of the regime's rule. For instance, Jackson (2010) defines weak regimes by examining three dimensions: state political infrastructural capacity, coercive capacity, and social cohesion through a shared sense of national identity (164). Another term for coercive capacity is extractive capacity, referring to the regime's ability to extract resources from the population to enrich itself. This capability, in general, requires a monopoly on military power (see Acemoglu and Robinson 2012; Migdal 1988; Oakes 2006; Feraru 2018).

Similarly, a broad literature on authoritarian regimes identifies three pillars upon which such regimes rely for survival: co-optation of key interest groups (namely the manipulation of potential opponents to join the ruling faction), repression, and legitimation, with public perceptions of legitimacy often the first pillar to crumble and lead to regime collapse (Gerschewski 2013; Gandhi and Przeworski 2006; Hess and Martin 2006). Although the concept of legitimacy is complicated to measure, I follow Gerschewski (2013) in defining legitimation as efforts by the regime to ensure "active consent, compliance with the rules, passive obedience, or mere toleration within the population" (18). In sum, weak regimes lack some combination of: popular legitimacy, the support of factions of the "selectorate" (see Bueno De Mesquita et al. 2005), social cohesion, and reliable political institutions to ensure fair transfers of power.

A feature of weak states is their propensity for facing internal threats to regime survival, distinct from external threats to state security. Often, a weak regime's actions to improve its security come at the expense of state or social well-being, such as when autocratic leaders in Northern Africa and the Middle East incited civil wars to avoid forceful removal from office during the Arab Spring (Feraru 104). I hypothesize that leaders in weak states will prioritize regime security. Their primary incentive is to stay in power and take actions to improve regime security even at the detriment of social well-being. This focus on regime security will have spillover effects on foreign policy up to and including the initiation of interstate conflict whenever: external powers directly incite or exacerbate internal unrest within the weak state, an international dispute has deeply symbolic implications, thus threatening a weak state leader's legitimacy, and when the cause of intra-party conflict is traced to an outside source. Note that none of these conditions rely on a leader diverting the public's attention or anger from domestic failings or political weakness; instead, when a regime security threat originates from a primarily external source, leaders will take external actions to address that threat directly.

With these definitions and the regime security model, we have the criteria to judge the strength of the Ba'athist regime and the framework to evaluate whether Saddam's decisions were in line with the regime security model's predictions. First, it is essential to review the pressures presented by various domestic factors and the accompanying threats to Saddam's Ba'athist regime. Following Iraq's 1932 independence from Britain and the overthrow of the monarchy in 1958, the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party attempted a coup in 1963 and again in 1968, the second time successfully winning control of the divided country. The Iraqi Ba'ath Party became highly

centralized under the authoritarian rule of Saddam Hussein, emphasizing pan-Arab nationalism and advocating for a unified socialist Arab state. However, the Ba'athists competed with other Iraqi groups espousing different and often incompatible ideologies, including communism, Ba'athism, and Nasserism, and with adversarial national and religious groups including the Kurds, Turkmens, and Sunni and Shia Muslims. Notably, the Ba'ath Party represented the minority, a secular Sunni party in a country of some 60% Shia Muslims.

This fragmented demographic presented various challenges to the Ba'ath Party, with one of the most significant during the 1980–1988 Iran-Iraq War. After the 1979 revolution in Iran, the Iraqi government initially welcomed the new Islamic republic. Still, relations soured as Ayatollah Khomeini (the leader of Iran following the 1979 Iranian Revolution) began openly supporting and encouraging revolutionary Shiites in Iraq. A group of Iranian-backed Shiites even attempted to assassinate Tariq Aziz, the then-deputy premier, in April 1980. Baghdad cracked down on Shiite dissidents (an instance of regime stability through repression) and then, as we will see again in the run-up to the invasion of Kuwait, embarked on ambitious programs to improve living conditions among Shiites (stability through legitimacy and co-optation) (Walt 1966, 238–39). While historians often explain the war as an opportunistic power grab over valuable territory, the best explanation for Saddam's decision to invade Iran was to defend against the effects of the Islamic revolution and face the threat at its source (Nelson 2018). The similarities ten years later would be striking, but with a threat that was both economic and ideological.

The economic situation in Iraq following the Iran-Iraq war was dire. The war itself had been highly costly; in 1980–1985, when annual GDP averaged around \$34 billion, some estimates put the cost of the war in direct expenditures plus forfeited oil revenue and economic growth at nearly \$176 billion (Alnasrawi 1986, 885). Most of this had been financed by government borrowing, and by 1989 Iraq was paying at least \$5 billion annually just to service its debt, constituting some 20% of its annual GDP. As Kuwait and the UAE continued producing over their OPEC production quotas after the war, the oil price dropped, leading to a significant decline in revenue for Baghdad. Combined with massive spending on military and related industries, these factors sparked a cash shortage that nearly forced the regime to default. This, in turn, led to a crisis of regime legitimacy amidst a tightening of foreign lending, severe inflation, and continual goods shortages (Freedman and Karsh 1995, 39–42; Meierding 2020, 146; Chaudhry 1991, 14–23). The economic crisis also brought unacceptably high levels of unemployment and economic stagnation. For comparison, in 1989, Iraq had a national income (GDP per capita) of under \$4,000, while its neighbor Kuwait was at almost \$12,000, or three times that of Iraq (according to data from the World Bank).

Trying to address the destabilizing effects of the economic situation, the government attempted broad economic privatization and liberalization initiatives. However, the regime instead exacerbated the economic issues, succeeding only in alienating labor interests that had traditionally been supporters of the government (Chaudhry

1991, 17). Civil society was stretched to the breaking point, especially as hundreds of thousands of soldiers began to be released into a high-inflation and low-employment environment in the two years following the end of the war (20). Economic distress only heightened the regime's sensitivity to ideological threats, which had been the critical cause of war less than a decade before.

Saddam was obsessed with how he was perceived domestically and internationally, as the regime security model predicts for leaders who rely on legitimation efforts for political survival. His keen awareness of his domestic and international image is well documented. For instance, according to a journalist present at a 1974 government-sponsored seminar where he was present, Saddam expelled a top official for the transgression of not calling him "Your Excellency, Sir" each time he spoke (Pulcrano 2003). On another occasion just before the U.S. military response in 1991, Saddam beamed when Palestine's Yassar Arafat called him the "Arab Knight" and the "Saladin of our time," praise that reflected widespread Arab admiration for his fiercely anti-Israel rhetoric (Baram 1993, 13). Ultimately, despite Saddam's best efforts at cultivating a royalty-like public image, this Arab admiration would not last.

Saddam saw international efforts to subvert his regime everywhere he looked following the Iran-Iraq War. With the refusal of Gulf states to lower oil production following that war, a war in which he saw himself as protecting the Arab world from Persian expansionism, he felt that Kuwait and others had betrayed him and tarnished his status as a defender of pan-Arab solidarity. In a high-level meeting of the Revolutionary Command Council two weeks before the invasion of Kuwait, Saddam discussed a draft letter to the Arab League that asserted Kuwait had created an "intentional scheme" to undermine Iraqi sovereignty by depressing oil prices and seizing Iraqi territory (Markwica 2018, 186). With an Israeli military buildup and American policy moves he saw as hostile, such as the continued naval presence in the Gulf and hesitancy surrounding agricultural credit guarantees, Saddam repeatedly said he saw a "conspiracy" out to get him (Gause 2002, 53–56; Haass 2009, 50–53). As predicted by the regime security model, Saddam began to distrust the military and constantly worried about a coup, leading him to purge hundreds of officers. Some sources documented failed coup attempts (Gause 2002, 56). The set of crises faced by the Ba'athist government created the "perfect storm" for a radical move in Baghdad: lingering fears over Islamist revolutionary ideology, extreme domestic economic and political distress, international slights to the regime's legitimacy, perceived Western attempts at subversion, and indications of factionalism or even coup attempts within the party.

## **Saddam's Invasion of Kuwait**

The domestic pressures on Baghdad combined to create a regime security crisis. Crumbling legitimacy, intra-party dissatisfaction, and a bloated and unwieldy military with dubious utility as a tool for repression all spelled disaster for Saddam if he could not stem the tide of domestic decay. Before I show how these factors were

the main impetus behind Saddam's invasion, I address the key theories that oppose this explanation. Then, after presenting my theory of Saddam's motives, I move on to why the regime security model accurately explains Saddam's rejection of the U.N. deadline and the timing, and rhetoric surrounding, the eventual end of the war.

### *Why Traditional Theories Fail to Explain Saddam's Invasion*

Scholars often interpret Saddam's invasion through the lens of offensive realism, which predicts that a state seeking security will try to increase its power relative to other states by building up its military capabilities and taking offensive steps to grow its influence. This school of thought enjoys excellent support from many Gulf War historians who assert that Kuwait, with its strategically significant oil reserves and long coastline, which guaranteed access to naval and shipping routes, was merely a pawn in Saddam's bid for regional hegemony (Baram 1993, 76–77; Yetiv 2008, 76–77). Factors that increased the exigency of invasion were the ending of Cold War bipolarity and its constraints on Saddam's behavior (Ali Musallam 1996, 97–101), long-standing border disputes with Kuwait (Freedman and Karsh 1995, 42–43; Khadduri and Ghareeb 1997, 95; Yetiv 2008, 77; Baram 1993, 5–6), and economic pressures from the high debt incurred by the Iran-Iraq War and falling oil prices. However, few of these developments can explain the timing of the invasion. Saddam would have known, for instance, that the change in Cold War bipolarity would allow the United States more room to maneuver in the Middle East just as the removal of Soviet constraints would free him to pursue his strategic agenda. With military superiority over and strategic interest in Kuwait being constant, a purely structural explanation must then rely on the claim that the trigger for the war was the U.S. "green light." Realists must depend on the assumption that Saddam rationally miscalculated the United States' interests, capabilities, and intent to defend Kuwait, thus totally failing to anticipate a U.S. response (see Mearsheimer 2003, 29–39).

The realist camp over-emphasizes and takes out of context the July 25 meeting with Ambassador Glaspie and incorrectly supposes that Saddam over-estimated U.S. support for his regime and misjudged the international constraints on his and U.S. behavior (see Duelfer and Dyson 2011; Baram 1993, 19–22; Haass 2009, 56–58; Bush and Scowcroft 1998, 310–312). Saddam would not have taken such assurances at face value, given his deep distrust of the United States following such events as the Iran-Contra revelations and the Voice of America editorial, both of which cemented his views about an American conspiracy (Palkki 2013; Brands and Palkki 2012). Saddam described the United States in 1979 as the "imperialist American enemy" ("Revolutionary Command Council" 1979, 3) and the Iran scandal another "stab in the back" (Palkki 2013, 50), after which he stated that he believed "Washington could not be trusted and that it was out to get him personally" (Comprehensive Report 2005, 31). Indeed, the fact that Baghdad was not surprised by the U.S. response was admitted by Foreign Minister Aziz when he told Secretary of State Baker, "We have been expecting U.S. military action against Iraq. [...] This conduct on our part wasn't the result of ignorance" (Meierding 2020, 154). Saddam's deep distrust of the United States

after the Iran-Iraq War and the many declarations he received regarding U.S. interests in the Gulf region suggests that the invasion of Kuwait cannot be explained by realist ambitions which were kept at bay by the U.S. until deterrence somehow failed in the summer of 1990.

Leaving behind strictly geopolitical explanations for the invasion, we turn now to those theories that rely solely on Iraq's economics. While economics-based explanations appropriately identify some domestic drivers for Saddam's actions, they often fail to justify why Saddam would have invaded if he knew that the United States would retaliate and deny him those oil resources. Even some realist explanations rely on Iraq's economic situation as the needed catalyst to explain the timing of Saddam's invasion, given the invariable nature of his interests in Kuwait. Careful consideration of the mechanisms behind an economics-driven invasion is needed; I find two such hypotheses in the literature. One focuses on Saddam's unbridled ambitions and his need for Kuwait's oil resources to fund those ambitions—the oil temptation model (Haass 2009, 75; Yetiv 2008, 81; Meierding 2020). The other approach, which is more compatible with the regime security model I present, is that economic concerns were primary to the regime because of the potential for a devastating recession to foment domestic unrest and lead to a loss of political power—the oil desperation model (Meierding 2020, 144-225). However, scholars defending either iteration of the economics argument do not present a suitable argument for why Saddam would rationally choose defeat, since defeat in war could hardly help an economy on the brink. A reader of geopolitics as savvy as Saddam Hussein would not have expected the United States to stand idly by his invasion of Kuwait, and he would have been keenly aware of U.S. military superiority. Furthermore, these economic explanations fail to put forth a logical catalyst for war; if Saddam was singularly focused on raising funds for his regime he should have accepted Kuwaiti concessions on the eve of war to return to its OPEC oil production quota (Gause 2002, 53; Markwica 2018, 187). Instead, he blew past what would have been the resolution to his economic woes in favor of armed invasion. A regime security model, however, can explain how invasion emerged as a viable strategy from Saddam's multi-faceted incentives to stave off domestic upheaval and increase his party's legitimacy.

Still others have argued that this deterrence failure was not an issue of signaling or misperception but a more fundamental problem of Saddam's motives, falsely blaming Saddam's unique personality. These theories point out that Saddam considered himself challenged by an international conspiracy and internal dissent, both of which required an invasion of Kuwait no matter the U.S. response (Stein 1992, 147-79; Gause 2002, 47-70; Markwica 2018). Others say it was Saddam's unbridled ambition that led him to invade (Haass 2009, 54). However, insofar as these theories rely on individual-level factors, such as Saddam's conspiratorial temperament or unrestrained ambition, they fail to acknowledge the validity of the "insecurity crisis" faced by the regime. Theories focused on Saddam must assert that Iraq would not have gone to war in the absence of the leader's aggressive personality. By contrast, my theory must show that any leader facing the same conditions and constraints as

Saddam would have made the same decisions. I show in the next section that, despite pushback from some cabinet members, Saddam's isolated Ba'ath party, at least his loyal coalition, faced threats that did indeed undermine regime security.

### *Regime Security and the Invasion of Kuwait*

Saddam's invasion of Kuwait was not an act of calculated aggression driven by his ambition for regional dominance. It was an act of desperation from a weak regime trying to stave off internal crises aggravated by external factors. Unlike the theories explored above, my regime security model predicts that the leader of an institutionally weak regime will act first to preserve regime security even at the expense of longer-term state survival. When synonymous with regime threats, state security threats will also prompt leaders to respond outside their borders. If Saddam's invasion was indeed driven by a regime security crisis, we should see evidence that Saddam was concerned about preventing domestic unrest, that he took rhetorical and policy steps to increase his legitimacy in the eyes of the people (including by increasing his regional standing), and that he made efforts to prevent international subversion or invasion of his regime.

Iraq's justification for war was defensive, a claim that is perhaps too readily dismissed by many scholars. In an interview with PBS aired in 1996, Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz claimed that Iraq's invasion of Kuwait was "a defensive decision. Iraq did not need Kuwait. If we had Kuwait in our mind for takeover, we could have done that in the '70s" (Tariq Aziz 1996). Indeed, this statement highlights the critical question that realism fails to explain: why Iraq did not move to invade Kuwait earlier. As reviewed above, the economic situation in Iraq was deteriorating to the point where the regime was worried about potential coups. Given U.S. policy regarding Iraq, Saddam was also convinced that Bush would take advantage of the end of Cold War constraints to topple the Ba'athist regime (Gause 2009, 92-95; Brands and Palkki 2012). Both Saddam and Aziz reflected this kind of thinking after the war. Asked why they would attack Kuwait if they knew the United States would retaliate, Aziz replied in his PBS interview that "you will either be hit inside your house and destroyed, economically and militarily. Or you go outside and attack the enemy in one of his bases" (Tariq Aziz 1996). In other words, they believed that the United States was planning a strike, so they had to take the first shot. Saddam's justifications to FBI interrogators were similar; he said that the United States was determined to see him overthrown and conspired with Israel to damage his regime ("Interview Session 5" 2009). While these justifications point to an expected military attack, which was certainly not being planned or signaled by the United States (Palkki 2013; Haass 2009), the U.S. threat to the regime was a reality. As detailed above, warming military and economic relations between Gulf states and the United States threatened Saddam's status as the "Arab Knight" and defender of Islam in the Middle East. This position was the main component of Saddam's legitimation efforts.

The question arises of whether this view—that the United States was primed and preparing to take some military action against him—was unique to Saddam's

psychology and experience. To some degree, this is a counterfactual line of questioning that cannot be satisfactorily answered (see Jervis 2013). Some would point to disagreements among his closest advisors as proof that the country might not have gone to war if another leader had been in power (Wafic Al Samarri 1996). However, scholarship has consistently shown that the role of president is unique (see Jervis 2013). Saddam, as president, would have been more accountable to anger arising from the selectorate—the group of influential individuals upon whom he depended for his political survival—than an advisor in any other position, thus he would have been more likely to take risks to save the regime than other senior leaders (see Bueno De Mesquita 2005). Thus, we cannot adequately judge whether his decisions were due to his personal temperament or whether the unique pressures associated with the office of chief executive would have forced any to do the same. Indeed, Jackson (2015) finds that any leader of a weak state will work to co-opt key constituencies and pit factions against each other to preempt coups, just as Saddam did in his treatment of his military and intelligence officers (see Baram 1993, 8).

The precarious position of the domestic economy weighed heavily on policy-makers' minds. At the January 1991 Revolutionary Command Council, deputy prime minister Taha Yasin Ramadan explained the logic of invasion with a domestic focus: "Yes, the battle is inevitable...How were we going to maintain the loyalty of the people and their support for the leader if they saw the inability of the leadership to provide a minimal standard of living in this rich country?" (Wafic Al Samarri 1996). With an eye toward domestic audiences, the regime targeted Kuwait as an external enemy responsible for the people's suffering, explaining that they needed a war to retain Iraqi honor and standard of living. Thus, the decision to invade was not to fund Saddam's ambitions, as Haass (2009) asserts (25). It was an act of economic desperation to stave off a domestic uprising (see Meierding 2020, 160). Note how this differs from the classical conception of a diversionary war; Saddam was not trying to distract his people with foreign adventures. He turned Kuwait into a scapegoat for Iraqis' economic hardships, which forced him to take an ever more aggressive actions against the country.

What finally caused Saddam to pull the trigger? Aziz explains that the pride and stubbornness of the Kuwaiti delegation on August 1 eventually led Saddam to order the invasion (Tariq Aziz 1996). Markwica (2018) points to the hasty war plans and emotional rhetoric of the moment to argue that ultimately it was Saddam's pride and angry temperament that caused him to invade Kuwait after being humiliated by Crown Prince Sa'd (195–97). However, we would expect any leader facing a regime security crisis to take strong measures against threats to honor and legitimacy, regardless of that leader's personality. Additionally, while one may argue that Saddam's reaction moved the invasion up a matter of days, the truth is that an invasion of Kuwait by that time was already determined. Indeed, Gause (2002) cites several meetings and reports that show that the actual decision to attack was likely made in June or even as early as March (53–55). Saddam had already placed his stake in the ground with a statement to the nation at the apex of the crisis. In a July 17 Baghdad

Radio broadcast, he blamed Gulf states' oil policy on the United States, threatening military action if they did not end the hostile policy ("Iraqi President Lashes Out" 1990). Rather than a case of rhetoric forcing his hand, this was a deliberate maneuver to solve his internal problems by gaining legitimacy, preempting and ending foreign plots against him, and putting his restless army to work.

Saddam's uncharacteristically Islamist language leading up to the invasion also suggests his focus on domestic and international legitimation. In December 1989, to further promote the regime's image as an Arab defender with sufficient religious tendencies, Saddam spoke out for liberating Palestine, saying, "I swear to God that we shall burn half of Israel if it tries to wage anything against Iraq" (Baram 1993, 11-12). Hoping that Arab admiration would give him legitimacy at home, he increased the intensity of anti-Israeli rhetoric through the spring (13-14). Finally, on the eve of the war, he told his senior commanders that "it is the Lord who wanted what has happened to happen. Our role in this decision is almost zero" (Piscatori 1991, 17). Following the announcement of Operation Desert Storm, which would base U.S. troops on Saudi Arabian soil, Saddam again relied on Islamic symbolism to stir up domestic and regional anti-U.S. sentiment. He said, "Until the voice of right rises in the Arab world, hit their interests wherever they are and rescue holy Mecca and rescue the grave of the Prophet Muhammad in Medina" (22). These explicit appeals to a broad Arab audience, despite the secular (and anti-Shia) stance of the Ba'ath party, suggest deliberate attempts to grow regional and domestic legitimacy and support, a classic case of regime security concerns dictating foreign actions.

### *Rejecting the U.N. Withdrawal Deadline*

While the above discussion details Saddam's motives in invading Kuwait and rejects the deterrence failure argument, the question remains of why Saddam did not give in to the U.N. withdrawal deadline. Were Saddam's goals not met by invading Kuwait and proving that the U.S. was supporting, and thereby corrupting, Gulf states? What did he stand to gain by choosing to lose a bruising war against the U.S. coalition forces? The regime security model again explains this seemingly irrational behavior.

As Stein (1992) details in his work, Saddam was bent on getting his way in Kuwait because this would solve the growing problems he faced domestically (173-76). Even if he suffered a military defeat, which he thought likely but not entirely sure given U.S. distaste for foreign ground wars and unclear effectiveness of airpower, Saddam believed that he could win politically. For one, Saddam thought that Arab support for the U.S. coalition would fracture in the face of actual fighting. While they ostensibly claimed that Israel was a part of the conspiracy against them, as Aziz reported (Tariq Aziz 1996), it is more likely that Saddam sought to reignite the surge of Arab support he received when he had harshly decried Israel just months earlier. Despite Israel's distance from the heat of battle, the Iraqi military fired some forty rocket missiles into Israel (and some aimed directly at U.S. coalition forces based in Saudi Arabia). Wafic Al Samarrai, the Head of Iraqi Military Intelligence during

the war, explicitly stated during a PBS interview that the scud missiles had “a moral political objective” to implicate Israel and “embarrass the Arab States that colluded with the West.”

Furthermore, Saddam could not submit to the deadline because admitting failure would have exacerbated the domestic legitimacy crisis. As Al-Marashi (2009) puts it, “Such an admission would demonstrate the leader’s weakness to the Iraqi public, the military, and most importantly his Tikriti inner core, leading to a possible coup” (460). Thus, compellence failed because Saddam’s goals were not intrinsic to Kuwaiti territory and military victory; his wins were about symbolic victories, the ending of international efforts to subvert his regime by fomenting Arab support, and increased domestic legitimacy as a strongman for Iraq. His same intentions for invading Kuwait precluded him from giving up in the face of U.S. threats because, in the end, his goal was to fight the foreign conspirators who so threatened his regime.

What seems illogical when viewed through a neorealist lens becomes understandable—perhaps even predictable—when seen through a regime security lens. As predicted by the model of regime security, Saddam was facing an internal crisis that demanded drastic measures. Sensing that the source of the insecurity lay outside his borders, Saddam attempted to solve the problem at its source by invading and refusing to retreat from Kuwait. However, this model does not apply to states with robust political institutions for which regime security does not differ fundamentally from state security. To show the limitations of the regime security model, I turn to the case of the United States in response to Saddam.

## **Strong States and the Regime Security Model: The U.S. Response**

While the behavior of the United States in response to the invasion and annexation of Kuwait is not particularly surprising, it is also not accurate to say that its response was “overdetermined” (Gause 2009, 103). Indeed, the historical record seems to indicate that the Bush administration itself was at first unsure how, or whether, to respond militarily to Saddam. In contrast to the institutionally weak Iraqi regime, which acted per the theory of regime security threat, the United States presents a case of a powerful hegemon working in line with the balance of power predictions. Thus, Operation Desert Storm presents an interesting case of an essentially realist outcome that was achieved through mechanisms that remain under debate.

The most compelling question regarding the U.S. response is whether the administration ever intended to use military force to stand up to Saddam. Many point out, for instance, that the administration was surprised and unprepared for the crisis and was unsure how or whether to respond (Yetiv 2003; Yetiv 2008; Engel 2017; Bush and Scowcroft 1998; Haass 2009). Engel (2017) points out that while some in the administration in the first days thought the invasion would have a positive impact on world oil prices and that Saddam was unlikely to achieve regional hegemony, it was clear that protecting Saudi Arabia was a line in the sand (385–87). These arguments also reinforce the notion that, given internal disagreement over the issue, it is very likely

that the administration did give mixed signals to Saddam regarding American interests and intents in the region (see Stein 1992, 149–55; Duelfer and Dyson 2011; Engel 2017). However, as noted previously, it was clear that Baghdad expected, or was at least not surprised by, U.S. retaliation. If Baghdad was so sure of a strong American response – even counted on it – why was Washington so unsure?

If U.S. interests in Kuwait were apparent, and Baghdad expected some degree of U.S. military response, then perhaps the administration was less confused and unsure than many assume. Some point to George Bush's seemingly quick decision after the first National Security Council (NSC) decision and a firm declaration that "this will not stand" as proof that George Bush's own historical experience and personality led to the relatively quick consolidation of the U.S. position (see Yetiv 2003; Haas 2009, 67–70; Wayne 1993). Specifically, some assert that a sense of similarity between Saddam's actions and those of Hitler encouraged Bush (and Thatcher) to take such a firm stance (MacDonald 2002). However, just as in Baghdad, the presence of some initial disagreement within the cabinet does not indicate that George Bush himself was critical. The U.S. reaction should be seen as the expected course of action by an unconstrained global hegemony wishing to preserve its interests in the Middle East.

Some of the previously mentioned theories do, in fact, correctly point to such structural factors. Engel's (2017) thesis focuses on the warming U.S.-Soviet relationship at the end of the Cold War, which permitted Bush to create a strong international coalition to counter Iraq. The desire to work with the Soviets prompted the administration to gather international support that later turned into a military coalition. Furthermore, efforts to counter Saddam were in part due to the United States' desire to spread its wings for the first time as a global hegemon capable of shaping the world without Cold War constraints (Engel 2017). U.S. interests in preserving a status quo in the Middle East were already evident during the Iran-Iraq War when America variously supported both Baghdad and Tehran to keep one from greatly triumphing over the other (Bush and Scowcroft 1998, 310).

Some of the U.S. interest in this region has been ascribed to oil, but this too should be seen as a part of hegemonic strategic behavior and not some sinister gambit for wealth. While U.S. oil consumption is enormous, Haass (2009) explains that U.S. policy in the Middle East cannot be "reduced to oil" (75). As Saddam's economic motives for invading Kuwait were strategic and desperate, not based on oil lust, so too were America's intentions broadly strategic. As Haass puts it, the distinction is that the United States wanted to guarantee an adequate supply of oil, not gain any financial advantage. Indeed, without the constraints of Cold War bipolarity, the United States was free to engage in a more outspoken defense of such strategic goals. Beyond just oil, Iraq's actions threatened American interests in democracy, norms of sovereignty, and general regional influence.

Despite some initial uncertainty from the first NSC meeting, numerous policymakers, including the President himself, understood from the beginning the "ramifications of the aggression on the emerging post-Cold War world" (75). Although only tacitly acknowledged, this viewpoint was indicative of a broad view of American

interests and the realization that the United States had the power to enforce them in the Middle East. Some of the concerns cited variously by policymakers and scholars are preventing Hussein from monopolizing oil supplies, retaining U.S. influence over Gulf states, preventing WMD proliferation, and preserving sovereignty. From the classic balance of power predictions, it is only expected that a hegemon will intervene to impose its will where it is expedient to do so. Thus, it does not take an argument of sinister oil greed or George Bush's psychology to explain predictable hegemonic behavior.

## Conclusion

States with weak institutions, such as the embattled autocratic Ba'athist regime in Iraq, conduct foreign policy with domestic pressures at the forefront of every decision. Just as in the Iran-Iraq War a decade earlier, Saddam's decision to invade Kuwait was motivated by a desperate need to put a stop to external manipulation of the domestic unrest already threatening to boil over. He sought to establish his legitimacy by gaining Arab support against a corrupt Western enemy through the war with Kuwait, a looming challenger both economically and symbolically in its dismissal of Iraqi protection against non-Arab threats. The regime struggled to address the economic concerns on its own and turned to external actions as a solution to the problem, not merely a distraction from it. These motives explain why Iraq invaded Kuwait and why it did not withdraw when military destruction became apparent, why it attempted to shift Arab attention onto Israel throughout the crisis, and why, even in defeat, Saddam claimed he had been victorious. Theories of realist ambition, an oil gambit, or Saddam's unique temperament fail to explain each of these steps as well as the regime security model does. By contrast, despite some debate, the United States' response was relatively in line with the expectations for a newly minted hegemonic power wishing to impose its will on the world.

These results do more than shed new light on the well-trodden evidence of the causes of the Gulf War. Beyond dismissing many theories for Saddam's invasion of Kuwait, including purely geostrategic, economic, or personality-based explanations, the regime security model of war developed in this paper has implications for other conflicts including weak states. When it seems that domestic concerns were at play in a leader's decision to go to war, scholars and analysts should be wary of falling back on the diversionary theory of war. Especially in the case of autocratic states like Iraq, the idea of transforming public anger into public support by sparking a war stretches plausibility. Instead, analysts and scholars may better predict and explain the initiation of war among weak states by closely examining the threats faced by the regime (as opposed to the state), including the internal jockeying for power, domestic economic and political pressures, and any external sources seeking to manipulate those vulnerabilities. Future research should apply such an approach to other cases of interstate conflict and should seek to establish systematic indicators of regime security crises that may have universal applicability.

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