

# THE CHALLENGE OF THE PERSIAN GULF CRISIS

*For the fragile, new world order,  
fault lines through the Middle East  
are a clear and present danger.*

BY JANICE GROSS STEIN

**T**HE PEACE THAT BROKE OUT WHEN THE COLD war ended did not last. Less than a year after the Berlin wall came down, the world is on the brink of a war that threatens to spread destruction throughout the Middle East. Riven with multiple conflicts, the region has become more dangerous in the last decade as the size of armies has grown and sophisticated military technology has proliferated.<sup>1</sup> The fault lines running through the Middle East have shattered the optimistic expectations of the peaceful shaping of the new international order.

Despite the new and improved relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union, the propensity to serious crisis in the new international order is clear, as are the changing dynamics of managing international crises without resort to war. The possibility of a nuclear exchange between the United States and the Soviet Union as a result of a crisis in the Middle East has disappeared, but the probability of chemical warfare and widespread civilian casualties in a regional war is real – for the people who live there, a distinction with very little difference.

Before dawn on 2 August, Iraqi troops poured across the border into Kuwait. Within three hours, the army had accomplished its objectives: the overthrow of the government of Kuwait and control of its oilfields. A week later, Iraq formally annexed Kuwait.

The use of force by one Arab government to annex another is unprecedented in the modern Middle East. Worldwide condemnation, an international air and naval embargo, the deployment of air and ground forces in the Gulf states, and the presence of naval forces in the Gulf have not yet succeeded in compelling Iraq to withdraw. On

the contrary, as the weeks have passed, both President George Bush and President Saddam Hussein have manipulated the risk of war in a test of resolve.

The international community, led by the United States, has deployed substantial forces in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states both to deter further use of force by Iraq and to compel Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait, by raising the risk of war. The unprecedented approval by the United Nations of wide-ranging sanctions has strengthened international pressure against Iraq.

In considering the origins and evolution of this crisis, several sets of issues are relevant. First, could this use of force have been avoided through more effective strategies of crisis prevention? If indeed a

crisis could have been avoided, why were these strategies not used? And now that the crisis is upon us, can it be managed, can international coercion succeed, short of a catastrophic war throughout the region?

## Did the US Fail to Prevent the Crisis?

The strategies used by the US in the weeks before Iraq's invasion are already the object of intense debate. The controversy focusses both on the intentions of Iraq and the response of the United States. To understand American strategy, it is necessary to put the current crisis in context.

In 1980, a year after the Ayatollah Khomeini came to power in Tehran, President Saddam Hussein of Iraq attacked Iran, hoping for a quick victory over armed forces that were disorganized in the midst of a revolution. After a series of initial victories by Iraq, Tehran gradually began to reverse the tide of battle. Although the war had been initiated by Iraq, most Arab states were sufficiently alarmed by the prospect of an Iranian victory that they began to supply extensive military and financial aid to Baghdad.

The relationship between the United States and Iraq similarly began to improve in the context of tense relations between Washington and the government in Tehran. After the war ended in 1988, the US continued to try to strengthen its relationship with Iraq as a regional counterweight to Iran. Despite the improved relationship, President Saddam Hussein made a series of disturbing speeches in the spring of 1990.

In February, at the end of a meeting of the Arab Cooperation Council,<sup>2</sup> Iraq's president predicted that because of the decline of Soviet power, the US would exercise hegemonic power in the Middle East for five years. Hussein argued:

The country [the United States] that will have the greatest influence in the region, through the Arab Gulf and its oil, will maintain its superiority as a superpower without an equal to compete with it. This means that if the Gulf people, along with all Arabs, are not careful, the Arab Gulf region will be governed by the wishes of the United States ... [Oil] prices will be fixed in line with a special perspective benefiting American interests and ignoring the interests of others.

The answer, he concluded, was the use of Arab economic power to force changes in American policy.

On 2 April, after a shipment to Baghdad of devices suitable for triggering nuclear weapons had been intercepted, President Hussein announced that Iraqi scientists had developed advanced chemical weapons and threatened to use them against Israel should Israel attack. At an Arab summit the following month in Baghdad, Saddam Hussein denounced the Arabs of the Gulf who were keeping the price of oil artificially low and thereby engaging in economic sabotage of Iraq.

1. Iraq's armed forces numbered 188,000 in 1977, and 1,000,000 in 1987; Iraq now deploys the fourth largest army in the world. Iran's forces numbered 342,000 in 1977 and 645,500 in 1987, excluding 350,000 listed as reserves; Syria's forces numbered 227,500 in 1977 and 407,500 in 1987; and Saudi Arabia's forces numbered 61,500 in 1977 and 73,500 in 1987. Israel's reserve call-up system makes troop strength comparisons difficult, but in the same period its tank strength increased from approximately 3,000 to almost 4,000. See International Institute for Strategic Studies (London), *The Military Balance, 1977/78 and 1987/88*.

2. The Arab Cooperation Council included Egypt, Jordan, and then North Yemen, as well as Iraq.