

Visiting Kuwait

Mar 18, 1991



Brief Analysis

Though Iraq wreaked enormous devastation on Kuwait's oil industry toward the end of the war, Kuwaitis can hope for a fairly rapid recovery after an initial period of sorting out. What may not return to normal is Kuwait's relationship with its Palestinian community and with Jordan. Kuwait and other Gulf states may be more willing to support an Arab-Israeli peace process than in the past. And Kuwait will almost certainly seek a significant American military presence in the Persian Gulf region for the foreseeable future.

Devastation and Hope

I had the opportunity to visit Kuwait on March 15 at the invitation of Kuwait's Ambassador to the United States as part of the first "Freedom Flight" of Americans to witness the results of the war. Our visit included a tour of Kuwait's Burgan Oil Field, a stop at the Yarmouk Palace (an Iraqi command post which doubled as a torture chamber), a meeting with Kuwait's Crown Prince/Prime Minister, a visit to the American embassy, and a drive on the "Road to Hell."

On reaching Kuwait, the first and overwhelming impression is from the billowing black smoke of the burning oil wells. When driving toward those wells, day turns into night and the temperature drops by nearly 20 degrees. Kuwait's 550 oil-well fires are burning out of control throughout the greater Burgan oil field at Ahmadi, one of the largest in the world. The air pollution is so intense that air filter masks must be worn near the oil fields.

Before the war, Kuwait had about 1,000 oil wells which produced upward of 2 million barrels of oil per day. Today, about 750 oil wells are out of commission, and it will take between 5 and 15 years to return production to pre-war levels. What impresses is the extent and efficiency of the Iraqi destruction. The Kuwait Oil Company reports that the Iraqis employed both local Palestinians and Iraqi National Oil Company employees to carefully plan the destruction and set the explosives in the most damaging way. Estimates of the oil being lost range from 1.5 million to 6 million barrels per day.

Beyond oil field destruction, the Iraqis also terrorized Kuwait's population. Particularly gruesome were the crude torture instruments encrusted with blood and the photographs of torture victims drawn from Kuwaiti morgues. Iraq apparently planned further devastation of Kuwaiti infrastructure and the kidnapping of additional Kuwaitis, but were prevented from pursuing these objectives by the success of the American ground campaign.

Without minimizing the extraordinary human cost and the temporary destruction of its oil wells, it appears that Kuwait is in an outstanding position to return to normality within the next two years. Coalition bombing destroyed very little in Kuwait. Iraqi forces damaged far more, but with strong will and economic resources Kuwait can rebuild rapidly after an initial period of sorting out. The most pressing near-term needs are restoring electric power, repairing damage to water facilities, and putting out oil fires. Once the process is truly underway, it should take off under its own momentum.

Lessons Learned

While it may be too soon to derive long-term lessons from the immediate period, the Kuwaitis we spoke to had

reached some early conclusions. These included the following.

1. Saddam must go. In Kuwaiti eyes, there can never be assured peace and security in the region as long as Saddam Hussein remains in power. Economic, political, and military pressure on Iraq must be continued until he is overthrown.
2. Iraq must pay for the damage it has done. We encountered vigorous demands that Iraq be required to pay reparations for the damage it had done to Kuwait. How was it, asked Kuwaitis, that Iraq might be allowed to pump oil for its own benefit when its neighbor's oil production had been destroyed? Would it not be reasonable to give Kuwait use of the Rumailah oil field in Iraq until Kuwaiti oil production was restored?
3. Palestinians cannot be trusted. Kuwaitis were bitter about their experience with the Palestinians during the crisis, particularly because Kuwait had been so supportive of the PLO from the earliest days. Kuwaitis reported that, while a handful of Palestinians had joined the resistance, most had supported Saddam Hussein. Some Palestinians had actively collaborated with Iraq in destroying oil wells and in locating Kuwaiti resistance fighters in hiding. In the eyes of most Kuwaitis, the Palestinians who have left Kuwait should not be allowed to return. There is serious doubt how many of the Palestinians in Kuwait today will be allowed to stay.
4. King Hussein will get no Kuwaiti support. Kuwait also feels betrayed by Jordan. At the popular level, Kuwaitis see no chance for reconciliation with King Hussein. The King stood with their foes in Kuwait's hour of need. Should he ever require assistance, he would do well to look elsewhere.
5. Peace with Israel is possible. Kuwaitis spoke with respect about the constructive approach Israel took during the war, and indicated that they would be interested in seeing a solution to the Arab-Israeli dispute. While there was no indication that Kuwait or other Gulf-state Arabs would take a leadership role in bringing the dispute to a close, there were hints that Kuwait would be willing to do its part. For example, Kuwaitis did not reject the idea of ending their secondary boycott of American firms who do business with Israel.
6. The United States must stay in the Gulf. Kuwaitis today are extraordinarily grateful to the United States, and officials like the prime minister spoke about deepening Kuwaiti-American cooperation. As long as Iraq has an army, Kuwait will perceive a threat and will seek American support. While United Nations or other nations' presence might be useful, in Kuwaiti eyes only the United States can provide for Kuwait's long-term security.

American flags fly everywhere in Kuwait today. This is a phenomenon we have seen elsewhere in periods immediately after a military victory. Such enthusiasm for the United States can quickly fade. But it is much more likely to continue in Kuwait, whose life literally was saved by American action. If the United States decides that it requires a military presence in Kuwait to provide for regional security, there is little doubt that Kuwait will seek to meet American requirements. This sentiment in favor of a strong American military presence in the region is likely to extend beyond Kuwait to the other Gulf Cooperation Council members. It marks a critical change in the region's security environment and in American relations with the GCC states.

Marvin Feuerwerker is the senior strategic fellow at The Washington Institute and the principal author of the 1991 study *Restoring the Balance: An Interim Report of The Washington Institute's Strategic Study Group*. He previously served as deputy assistant secretary for policy analysis at the Department of Defense. ❖

Policy #77

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iraq (/policy-analysis/iraq)

Gulf States (/policy-analysis/gulf-states)