

Washington Institute Conference: Perspectives on the Gulf Crisis

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Sep 18, 1990

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Barry Rubin was a senior fellow at the Institute from 1988-1993 and a visiting fellow frequently thereafter. He passed at the age of 64 in February 2014.



Brief Analysis

The Fifth Annual Policy Conference of The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, held September 14-16, brought out a number of new ideas and perspectives on the Persian Gulf crisis. These included important points about administration strategy, the attitudes of Arab states and Israel, the time frame for various tactics, and the difficulties of military action.

Administration speakers included Undersecretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz ([read his remarks \(templateC07.php?CID=54\)](#)) and National Security Council Senior Staff member Richard Haass, while foreign guests included Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Arens and Kuwaiti Ambassador Saud Nasir Al-Sabah ([read his remarks \(templateC07.php?CID=53\)](#)).

Some participants suggested that an important factor often omitted from discussions here was the speed with which Iraq was destroying Kuwait itself and effecting a mass transfer of populations. Many Kuwaiti citizens have left or are leaving, while the Iraqi authorities are dismantling the national infrastructure by destroying records, looting facilities, removing food, and other measures. Thus, there might be a point of no return after which this destruction will have gone too far to reconstruct easily the state of Kuwait. This Iraqi strategy is also an important indication of Baghdad's determination to stay in Kuwait.

Reading Iraq's intentions was also a major feature of panel discussions. Given Iraq's political culture, the regime's history, and his own world view, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein is unlikely to back down. Clearly, he did not anticipate the breadth and seriousness of international opposition. It is possible that he will measure the forces aligned against him and withdraw -- if he does so he can almost certainly survive in power -- but he seems more likely to conclude that patience will bring victory.

The participants in the conference overwhelmingly supported U.S. policy in the crisis. But on closely examining the sanctions and Iraq's economic assets, it seems that Baghdad can stay the course well into 1991. Questions were raised as to whether the United States could wait that long.

But military options raised equal or more serious difficulties. Military experts warned that a U.S. offensive to liberate Kuwait could be costly, while an attack aimed at Iraq itself might be prohibitive in casualties. Public and elite support

would weaken if victory was not quick. And an aerial assault alone, though it could weaken Iraqi resolve, was unlikely to force Saddam Hussein to withdraw. The fact that Iraq is holding Americans and other foreigners as hostages could not deter the United States from taking necessary action.

The administration is keeping open all options, determined not to tip its hand to Iraq too soon. It is pleased with the level of international cooperation on sanctions. There is, however, increasing concern that sanctions may be, in effect, assisting Iraq in starving the Kuwaiti population and encouraging its emigration. International pressure on humanitarian grounds could force the administration to drop the food embargo. If this adjustment proved necessary, efforts would have to be made to prevent the appearance of a victory for Iraq.

Israel's role was seen as appropriately low key and contributing to the U.S. effort. Some expressed serious concern that a failure to coordinate U.S. and Israeli strategies could lead to serious problems in the event of an Iraqi attack on Israel or move into Jordan.

Saudi Arabia remains firmly determined to force Baghdad's withdrawal and the restoration of the emirate. However, it was felt that Saudi calls for quick action were a reflection of their concerns about U.S. staying power and perhaps about their own as well.

In an on-the-record speech, Defense Minister Arens praised U.S. policy but indicated his concern over large-scale U.S. arms sales to Saudi Arabia and urged that the United States continue to preserve Israel's strategic edge.

In assessing longer term options, many participants felt that the old security structure in the Persian Gulf had clearly failed. The extended time necessary to deploy American troops and equipment shows the difficulty in responding to some future crisis which might not allow such a period for a build-up. U.S. forces or equipment were likely to remain in the Gulf area, at some level higher than before, for an extended period. Yet any such commitment must be acceptable to the local states.

Another post-crisis consideration is the possibility of establishing some broader Middle East strategic and unconventional arms agreements. If Iraq's chemical and missile capacity survives -- and Baghdad continues efforts to achieve nuclear weapons -- an international embargo on arms sales could continue even if it did withdraw from Kuwait. Yet the growing number of states having access to these weapons, and potentially to biological warfare measures, forces exploration of the willingness of regimes to limit or eliminate whole classes of arms. Such an effort would face formidable, but perhaps not insurmountable, political roadblocks.

There was a general consensus that the United States and its allies could not allow themselves to be defeated in this confrontation with Iraq. The consequences would be a regional perception of Saddam Hussein as a strongman who must be either appeased or joined.

Participants also supported the stated U.S. objectives in the crisis to defend Saudi Arabia, return Kuwait to independence and its rightful government, and protect U.S. citizens. There were very different views on such potential, unstated goals as the removal of Saddam Hussein and the destruction of Iraq's war-making and unconventional warfare capacity. It was generally thought that these latter objectives lay beyond U.S. capabilities. The main priority must be the liberation of Kuwait.

The crisis over Kuwait is the first test of the post-Cold War international order and of the U.S. ability to provide leadership in building a broad international coalition to oppose aggression. Unless this effort succeeds, prospects for continued cooperation and similar cooperation in the future will become far less likely. If Iraq's action is not deterred, others are likely to imitate it during the coming decade.

Barry Rubin is the senior fellow at The Washington Institute. Among his most recent publications are the Institute study *Inside the PLO: Officials, Notables, Revolutionaries* (Policy Focus #12, 1989), *Islamic Fundamentalism in*

Egyptian Politics (St. Martin's Press, 1990) and the forthcoming Revolution until Victory: The Politics and History of the PLO. ❖

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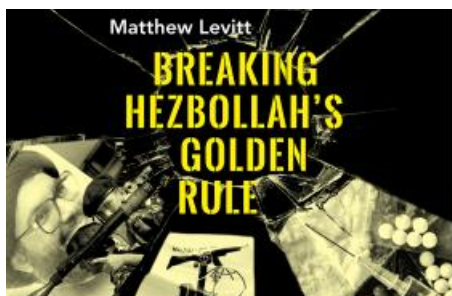
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