7 War in the Gulf

Iran and Iraq, 1980–9

It is tempting to portray the Iraq–Iran conflict predominantly in terms of a recent manifestation of a historical enmity between the Arabs and the Persians. Or, and indeed as well, as a religious and political struggle between Sunni and Shi'a. But both descriptions are misleading and incomplete. This was a thoroughly modern inter-state war for thoroughly modern reasons of national interest and regional hegemony in which ideology, ethnic rivalries and religious fervour played their parts but were not central to the main issues.

The war itself was also modern in its nature in terms of armaments and *matériel*: missiles, aerial bombardment and the use of weapons of mass destruction. While neither country had a nuclear capability, they both deployed sufficiently lethal chemical weapons to cause thousands of deaths and casualties. Estimates vary, but probably up to one million people were killed or injured in this decade-long conflict – with 60 per cent of those casualties sustained by Iran. The war also cost US$200 billion directly and another $1,000 billion indirectly, according to most estimates. By the end of the war each side had more than 1.3 million people under arms – half of all Iraqi men and a sixth of all Iranian men of military age.[1] Both sides somewhat stretched the definition of 'military age', using both teenage conscripts and equally immature 'volunteers' as cannon fodder, especially in the later stages of the conflict.

As Yapp has pointed out, although the Iraq–Iran War has generally been known as the Gulf War, the Gulf itself, whether prefixed as 'Arab' or 'Persian', was neither the bone of contention nor the main theatre of operations.[2] We have stuck to the usual description because, from the perception of non-combatants, especially the Gulf monarchies and the superpowers, the Gulf was the major focus of concern, irrespective of where the main fighting actually took place. As we describe later, worries about the effect of hostilities (attacks on shipping and mining) on the flow of oil and other trade through and from the Gulf (from where a sixth of the West's oil imports

originated) made external involvement inevitable – as did fears that the Iranians were intent on 'exporting' their revolution via the subversion of minority Shi'a communities in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, in addition to other considerations to do with maintaining the stability and security of the region.

It is difficult to identify a single *casus belli*, unless it was simple Iraqi miscalculation. There were points of friction aplenty between the two countries. From the overthrow of the Hashemite monarchy in Baghdad in 1958, up to the collapse of the Shah's rule in 1979, relations between the two regimes had rarely been better than correct, and often much worse. Republican, self-styled revolutionary, anti-Western Iraq was instinctively chalk to the cheese of the equally self-styled 'imperial' Iran, westward leaning and perceived to be Washington's natural partner, if not its client state, in the northern Gulf. This mutual antagonism was compounded by rival ambitions for political and economic hegemony in the region. The Iranians, even unprompted by Washington, saw themselves as the guardians of Gulf security following an announcement in 1968 of the British withdrawal in 1971. Iran considered this necessary to safeguard oil exports and offshore oil installations. By contrast, Iraq cast itself as the principal proponent of the concept of the 'Arab' Gulf. The Iranians, although not Arab, were more akin in political ethos to the traditional, also Western-aligned, Arab Gulf monarchies than was republican Iraq – an Arab 'brother' but an uncomfortably big one.

The Iranians demonstrated their military reach as a regional power by sending troops to Oman in 1972 to assist the Sultan in suppressing a nationalist revolt. They had also alienated much of the Arab world a year previously by seizing two strategic islands (the Greater and Lesser Tunbs) off the coast of the UAE and had imposed control on a third – Abu Musa – extracting a joint sovereignty agreement with the ruler of Sharjah through *force majeure*. Baghdad had led the anti-Iranian pack on that occasion (breaking relations with Tehran) and stridently opposed foreign intervention in Oman. But whatever the rhetoric, and despite the evidence of Iranian aggrandizement, the Arab Gulf monarchies continued throughout the 1970s to be instinctively more comfortable with Iran than with Iraq. The latter, with its radical posture on Arab–Israel in an attempt to assume Arab leadership from Egypt and its close ties with the Soviet Union (despite the regime's advocacy of non-alignment), on whom it mostly relied for arms, alienated the moderates and conservatives in the area. They, of course, had vivid memories of Iraq's aggressive stance towards Kuwait in 1961, when the newly independent emirate had come under threat of attack from General Qasim's regime.

Territory was the major issue for dispute between Iraq and Iran from the early 1960s onwards. The important Shatt al-Arab waterway (from the

Map E – Iran/Iraq and the Northern Gulf

confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates to the Gulf) had been under Iraqi control since a treaty of 1937 placed the border on the Iranian eastern bank low watermark. In 1969 Iran defied Iraqi instructions by using warships to escort Iranian flagged vessels in the Shatt, asserting a claim, by dint of *force majeure*, to a right of navigation along the *thalweg* – the middle of the deepest shipping channel. Iran's military superiority at the time forced a humiliated Iraq to accept *de facto* use of the waterway by Iranian ships.

Further aggravation was inevitable, especially against the background of substantial Iranian assistance for Iraqi Kurds in the north in their revolt against Baghdad – flaring intermittently from the early 1960s onwards – which nearly led to an all-out military confrontation following a series of border skirmishes.[3] It was during this period that both countries, realizing the vulnerability of installations in the Shatt to hostile acts, took strenuous action to relocate strategic facilities, such as oil terminals, away from this narrow waterway. This was easier for Iran, with its long length of eastern Gulf coast, than for Iraq, with its limited access to open sea. Consequently, Iran built ports in the Gulf to lessen dependence on its principal oil terminal at Abadan, while the Iraqis sought to use overland pipelines to export their oil from the Gulf area. This was not altogether a successful strategy as the trans-Syrian pipeline was subject to intermittent closure because of internal political upheaval. Pipelines built later across Saudi Arabia (TAPLINE) and Turkey in the 1980s during the Gulf War proved more reliable until put out of commission following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990.

The 1975 Algiers Agreement between Iran and Iraq confirmed the border along the *thalweg*. In exchange for getting their way on the border, the Iranians stopped assistance to the rebellious Kurds, who accepted a ceasefire and agreed a truce with Baghdad. However, although the treaty led to a suspension of hostilities and a lessening of tension, the Iraqis never really accepted the *thalweg* as a *de jure* frontier, and a return to control of the waterway as enshrined in the 1937 agreement remained a central Iraqi objective.

The Iranian revolution of 1979 under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomenei started the countdown to conflict. The downfall of the Shah more or less coincided with the emergence of Saddam Hussein as President of Iraq and chairman of the ruling Ba'ath Party's Revolutionary Command Council (RCC). Saddam, as secretary-general of the party, had pulled most of the strings from behind the scenes for several years but now felt the need to entrench his position in the public eye. He immediately claimed the unearthing of an attempted coup in which he alleged that the Syrians were implicated. This led to a ruthless purge of opponents within the RCC and an abrupt end to recently formulated plans for a union with Syria, thus once again reopening the long-standing rift with the other wing of the Ba'ath Party,

which had ruled in Damascus for several years. Saddam also cracked down on the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) and distanced himself from the Soviet Union (and dependence on Russian weapons), whose invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979 he publicly condemned.[4] This indicated a tilt to the West, a tactic which was to benefit him during the coming conflict with Iran.

Relations between Saddam's Iraq and Khomeini's Iran deteriorated rapidly. The Iraq Sunni leadership of a predominantly secular state was concerned that the appeal of Shi'ite revolutionary Iran ('exporting the revolution', it was soon to be called) might inflame anti-regime sentiments among Iraq's Shi'a majority, estimated at 55 per cent of the population at the time. The Iraqi Shi'as, since the formation of the modern state, had perceived themselves as something of an oppressed majority – second-class citizens under-represented in the government hierarchy and within the senior ranks of the armed forces. There were therefore ample long-standing grievances within the community to be exploited by aggressive co-religionists advocating resistance to Sunni oppression throughout the region.

In an increasingly hostile war of words the Iraqi and Iranian leaderships exchanged accusation and counter-accusation linked to territorial claims. Iraq, as part of its bid for recognition as the paramount power in the Gulf, called for the liberation of the Tunbs and Abu Musa. Tehran blamed Baghdad for demands for autonomy by the majority Arab community in Iran's province of Khuzestan (called 'Arabistan' by Arabs). Border incidents proliferated once again and Saddam Hussein probably calculated that revolutionary Iran was in such turmoil, and its army so weakened by purges, that it would not be able to resist a massive attack, albeit one confined to achieving limited territorial gains along Iraq's south-eastern border. Thus he could reverse the humiliation of conceding to Iran over the Shatt and, using captured territory as a bargaining counter, make border adjustments in Iraq's favour to other disputed areas, including winning concessions over Khuzestan, thereby demonstrating that Iraq, not Iran, was the power to be reckoned with in the Gulf. The overthrow of Khomeini, if not the main war objective (as some writers have claimed[5]), would certainly be a welcome bonus.

Whatever Saddam Hussein's intentions, once open conflict erupted it was soon evident that he had badly miscalculated the effectiveness of the Iranian response. The initial invasion was launched on 22 September 1980 on a 300-mile front. This had been preceded by a formal Iraqi abrogation of the Algiers Agreement on the pretext that Iran had failed to make a border readjustment as agreed in 1975. Despite considerable early territorial gains in the south-east, much fiercer than expected Iranian resistance ensured that the Iraqi advance soon halted. Indeed, in spring 1982 an Iranian counter-offensive regained most of the territory occupied by Iraqi troops, including

Khorramshahr in May. Both sides were now deadlocked in an immobile war of attrition.

The Iraqi leadership had rightly estimated that the Iranian armed forces had been seriously disrupted by purges immediately following Khomeini's assumption of power, but against all expectations they managed quickly to reorganize and fight back. Saddam Hussein had given an ideological spin to his campaign by naming it the 'Battle of Qadisiyya', recalling the Arab victory over Sassanid Iran (and its subsequent conversion to Islam) in AD 637. But the Iranians more effectively summoned up past spirits of deeply rooted hostile and equally ideological images of Arab Sunnis who had oppressed Persian Shi'as for centuries.[6] Saddam had also underestimated Khomeini's ability to unite and inspire his people to resist and defeat Iraqi aggression, motivating his troops with religious and nationalistic fervour. As the war progressed many eyewitness accounts contrasted the often suicidal fanaticism of the Iranian soldiers, apparently eager to die in battle in human-wave attacks, with the more conventional tactics of the obviously less committed Iraqis. By June 1982 it was clear to Saddam that the new Battle of Qadisiyya had failed. He recognized this by pulling his forces out of what little territory in Iran still lay under Iraqi control. Indeed, it was apparent to some observers even at this early stage that this war would not be decided on the battlefield.

Space does not permit a blow-by-blow chronological account of the next seven years of ultimately futile war,[7] but some features and distinct phases are worth detailing briefly. Iraq was on the defensive in the land war from 1982 onwards. By contrast, Iran was occupying nearly 800 square kilometres of Iraqi territory by October 1983. Indeed, until the last stages of the war, Iran had much the better of land engagements, also capturing Fao in 1986. Never in any real danger of defeat, the Iranians doggedly stuck to their apparently immutable position of no peace negotiations in the absence of massive reparations, admission of guilt by the Iraqis and the removal of Saddam Hussein from the Iraqi leadership. This obliged Iraq to embark on a policy of seeking to inflict such unacceptable damage on the enemy that the regime would be forced to the negotiating table. So, from 1984 onwards, Iraq used its superior air power, including the most sophisticated French-supplied Super Etendard fighters and Exocet missiles, to target Iran's petroleum export industry. Previously both sides had used missiles to attack each other's towns in what became known as 'the war of the cities'. Iraq also declared an exclusion zone in the northern Gulf and attacked vessels going to and from the main Iranian terminal at Kharg Island, and thus succeeded in making the export of Iranian oil hazardous and expensive.

Saddam also sought to 'internationalize' the conflict and attract as much external support as possible. In this he was assisted by increasing Iranian

intransigence in refusing to negotiate a settlement, with the Iranians brushing aside numerous attempts by the UN and others to mediate. Before the war Saddam's regime had courted financial backers among the Gulf states, such as Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, arguing that Iraq would act as a first line of defence against any threat posed by Shi'a militants in Tehran. Aware of their own uneasy relations with the native Shi'a populations in their own states, the rulers of both countries were prepared to be generous with financial support for Baghdad throughout the war: Kuwait provided loans of over US$6 billion while Saudi Arabia was even more generous, and both states sold oil on behalf of Iraq. By the end of the conflict some estimates puts Baghdad's total indebtedness to Kuwait at $15 billion and to Saudi Arabia at a staggering $34 billion! Other Arab Gulf states chipped in, too, with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) being especially forthcoming. With Iraq's Gulf ports of Basra and Umm Qasr under threat, its neighbours also helped with opening up land transit routes for oil exports. Aqaba, in Jordan, in effect became Iraq's largest seaport. Generally speaking Arab countries were solid in their backing for Baghdad, and Egypt's strong support (some of its troops even fought alongside the Iraqis) did much to restore its position in the Arab world following ostracism after Camp David. Only maverick Libya and anti-Saddam Syria refrained from any form of support for their Arab brother.

As the conflict dragged on the two superpowers were also inclined towards Iraq. The USA initially found both regimes repugnant and tended to remain aloof. But its attitude to Iran was particularly strongly coloured by the humiliation of the seizure of the US Embassy in 1979 and the subsequent failure of a military operation to rescue the staff held hostage. Despite strains in the relationship over Baghdad's treatment of the ICP, the Soviets were instinctively inclined to support a long-standing client. Crucially, both superpowers had a common concern: the effect of an Iranian victory on the stability of the region. Any 'export' of what was perceived as a subversive form of aggressive Islamic 'fundamentalism' not only had the potential to inflame Shi'ite minorities (a majority in Bahrain) in GCC countries but to excite Islamic communities in nearby regions of the Soviet Empire. The USSR accordingly became, once again, the principal arms supplier to Iraq. European states such as France and Britain also benefited from satisfying Iraqi arms demands, and the People's Republic of China was another major weapons provider to both sides, but more so to Iraq.[8] We shall describe below how the superpowers and their allies became more directly involved in the protection of their interests as the area of conflict expanded.

Iran experienced considerable problems both militarily and diplomatically. The lack of air power and enough modern armour prevented a successful frontal assault towards central Iraq. And its willingness to stir up the Iraqi Kurds was initially inhibited by fear of repercussions among its own Kurdish

community, should the Iraqis retaliate similarly, although this was a card that was played in desperation in the latter part of the war. Thus Iran concentrated its efforts on the south, where it was hoped (vainly, as it happened) that Shi'a Iraqis might join in – capturing Fao, cutting on occasion the main Basra–Baghdad road, but never managing to seize Basra itself. Here too the land war remained in stalemate, sapping the morale of the forces, although in 1986 it seemed possible that the Iranians might win a major victory in the south.

Iran's other option was to attack shipping in the Gulf belonging to (or using ports of) states sympathetic to Iraq. Kuwait was a particular target: between October 1986 and April 1987 fifteen ships going to and from Kuwait were attacked and in some cases cargoes seized. To these maritime attacks were added occasional (if haphazard) launches of Chinese-supplied Silkworm missiles targeted on Kuwait City. Iran also made liberal use of mines in the narrow sea-lanes of the Straits of Hormuz. However, much of this proved self-defeating. The Kuwaitis cleverly manipulated the major powers into protecting its oil tankers by having them reflagged with either the 'Stars and Stripes' (in the case of eleven vessels) or British colours (on four more). Other tankers were leased from the USSR and remained Soviet-flagged vessels. Thus external parties were obliged to provide protection for 'their' ships. A Western naval presence was anyhow in place to try to maintain normal commercial activity, deterring both Iraq and Iran, and minesweepers became increasingly involved in keeping the sea-lanes open. This multinational task force (US, UK and France, mainly), known as 'the Armilla Patrol', was a substantial naval presence by the end of the war and seen by the Iranians as mostly directed against them. The Iranians threatened retaliation and promised to sink US warships if provoked, but, ironically, it was the Iraqis who ultimately attacked a US frigate, USS *Stark*, killing thirty-seven sailors. The Iraqis claimed the attack was an 'error' and apologized, but suspicions remain that it was in retaliation following media revelations that Washington had secretly supplied arms to Iran in the so-called 'Irangate' affair.[9] There were also press allegations that the USA had supplied false intelligence to both sides to ensure a stalemate in the war: the argument being that it suited Washington's strategic interests to have Iraq and Iran at each other's throats so as to counter any threat that either regime might otherwise present to the Gulf monarchies.

There were various attempts at mediation throughout the war, and the UN managed the odd success, such as brokering a cessation of attacks on civilian targets by both sides in June 1984. This, however, was subsequently ignored by Iraq, which resumed air attacks in March 1985, having been frustrated by continued stalemate on the ground. Further unilateral suspensions offered by Iraq to induce Iran to negotiate failed to achieve the desired result. Other attempts to bring Iran to peace talks continued to founder on

Iranian insistence on unacceptable conditions, such as claiming $350 billion war reparations at one point. This attitude increased Iran's international isolation, limiting its diplomatic options; but pariah status did not seem to influence (or worry) the regime. Saudi Arabia, Iraq's principal financial backer, made strenuous behind-the-scenes efforts to bring about a ceasefire, having improved its own relations with Tehran through pragmatic negotiations over restoring and then maintaining the price of Gulf-sourced oil. Then the UN Security Council's efforts took on a new urgency with the prospect of the USA being drawn into a direct military confrontation with Iran over its threats to attack US warships in the Gulf 'if provoked'. Attacks on vessels in the Gulf by both sides escalated sharply throughout 1987, and the damaging of a US frigate by a mine allegedly laid by Iran resulted in a US retaliatory attack on an Iranian naval base. Security Council Resolution (SCR) 598, adopted unanimously on 29 July 1987, called for an immediate ceasefire and withdrawal of forces to international borders, and sought Iranian and Iraqi cooperation in seeking a settlement. Iraqi acceptance (conditional on Iranian agreement) was negated by Iran's condemnation of the resolution as unfair, because Iraq was not identified as the aggressor and the USA was maintaining its naval presence in the Gulf as 'Iraq's ally'.

Iran continued to resist pressure from the international community to accept SCR 598 and agree to a ceasefire, presumably because the regime felt that the war could yet be won. However, then the tide of battle turned in favour of Iraq. Iran had enjoyed some success in the land war in early 1987, penetrating Iraqi territory in several places along the 1,200-kilometre war front, but by early 1988 Iraqi counter-offensives had caused heavy casualties (the Iraqis, in particular, made effective use of chemical weapons, such as mustard gas), taking their toll on an increasingly war-weary Iranian military infrastructure. Volunteers were not coming forward as before and there was apparently disagreement over strategy and tactics in the higher echelons of the Iranian government. A Kurdish offensive (the largest since 1974–5) hoping to exploit Iraq's involvement on a broad front and in support of Iranian forces, although initially successful, came to a tragic end with an Iraqi chemical attack on Halabja in March 1988, killing 4,000 Kurdish civilians. Many more were allegedly killed by poison gas in a subsequent campaign after the Gulf conflict had apparently ended.[10] With their forces in retreat on most fronts, and with Iraqis on Iranian soil for the first time for some years, the Iranians unexpectedly announced their unconditional acceptance of SCR 598 on 18 July 1988. Here again Saudi Arabian influence may have played some part, and it is believed that they may also have persuaded the Iraqis to agree to a ceasefire despite their recent military successes. (This was shortly after a US warship accidentally shot down an Iranian civilian airliner, killing 270 people.) A ceasefire came into effect a

month later. Apart from a few subsequent minor alarums and excursions, the Iraq–Iran war was at an end.

The Iraqis declared themselves the victors in the contest. Certainly they had had the best of the last few months of fighting, liberating all their own territory and occupying parts of Iran. But in truth this wretched war, the greatest inter-state conflict in the second half of the twentieth century, ended as a draw. Most of the goals scored were 'own'. In terms of casualties, damage (to fifty large towns or cities) and bleeding of resources, both countries were losers. Aburish called it 'an aimless war,'[11] but 'pointless' is perhaps a more fitting epithet. Saddam, preoccupied with Kuwait in August 1990, quietly conceded all points of difference with Iran in that month when seeking a formal peace with the old enemy. He thus tacitly acknowledged that Iraq had achieved none of its war aims. Neither side had established a clear hegemony in the region. The international community – the UN and the major powers – had only just managed to contain the conflagration within acceptable limits; the stability of the rest of the region was maintained and a temporary loss of oil production managed without significant disruption to the market. But it had failed to halt the war until the combatants themselves were prepared to call it quits, thus demonstrating the limitations of international intervention even when both superpowers were, more or less, pulling in the same direction. However, it has to be said (for reasons described in Chapter 3) that the Soviet Union was beginning its withdrawal from substantial involvement in international issues towards the end of the 1980s, and so was not a major player in the Gulf for the latter part of the conflict.

The longevity of the conflict was primarily down to the determination and stubbornness of the two main protagonists, Saddam Hussein and Ayatollah Khomeini. Neither was prepared to give way and both managed to gain and retain sufficient control to ensure they got their way. Despite the evident futility of the war, especially as it appeared to foreign observers, neither leader's position was even seriously threatened by the indecisive outcome of the conflict. Indeed, for some years the war against old enemies was popular in both countries. Small successes could be presented domestically as major national triumphs. The ebb and flow of the contest gave both nations hope of ultimate victory from time to time. It also suited both regimes to have an external enemy to take people's minds off domestic discontents. Moreover, as the war dragged on and became bogged down, both leaderships probably hesitated at calling a halt to hostilities, given the difficulty of explaining to their people how so much effort and bloodshed had achieved so little. This was especially so as the casualties mounted; very few families in either country were left personally untouched by the carnage of war. But, in the final analysis, public opinion counted for little in both countries. And

even if one of the two protagonists had clearly been seen as the loser, it is unlikely that the defeated regime would have been swept away, so efficient (and ruthless) were both countries' mechanisms of repression. In the Iranian case, the Islamic republic effectively adapted and refined the instruments of control invented under the Shah.

Throughout the war both regimes felt they were playing for big stakes. Each saw the other as a formidable obstacle to their ambitions. Khomeini remained intent on the export of his revolutionary ideals via co-religionists throughout the Gulf. Saddam's desire for his regional hegemony to be recognized and his position in the wider Arab world to be appreciated drove him on. Both leaders glimpsed fleeting opportunities of victory – Iran in the land battle, Saddam via the air war. This helped to keep them going. Saddam also felt that the apparent support of the international community, with both superpowers more hostile to Iran, might in the end prove decisive. Ultimately, as stalemate set in, both leaderships recognized that the chances of decisive victory were illusory and that there were limits, even in autocracies, to what could be expected of exhausted and demoralized armed forces. Moreover, both economies were badly damaged by nearly ten years of conflict. Although Saddam may have been tempted to carry on when his army started to get the better of the land war in the dying months of the war, he was probably reluctant to push his troops much further. So, in the end, grim determination and the mutual personal hatred that motivated both leaders were not enough for one to see off the other.

One conflict spawned a second. Iraq, with the damage done to its economy and with fears about the long-term effects that this might have on popular support for a regime severely dented by the war, needed a quick fix to its problems. This at least seemed to be Saddam's perception. How important a factor it was as a cause of part two of the Gulf War – the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait – we will discuss in the next chapter.

8 The Kuwait crisis

Brother versus brother

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait began in the early hours of 2 August 1990 and ended after a few hours of sporadic fighting with the occupation of the entire emirate by 100,000 troops. This was the start of a crisis that was to lead to conflict and the comprehensive rout of the Iraqi occupying forces six months later – but only after the assembly of a massive military coalition, over 700,000 strong, under US leadership and with contributions from over thirty countries, ten of them Arab. Never before in the history of the region had so many Arab countries gone into battle against an Arab brother, one who not much more than a year previously had enjoyed widespread fraternal support against the Iranian (Persian) enemy. Never before had the United Nations authorized the use of force against a member state with the consenting votes of both superpowers. A decade later, divisions in the Arab world opened or exacerbated by this conflict remained largely intact. By then, the United States had no serious international challenger within the region. And Iraq, still under Saddam Hussein, remained a pariah state, subject since 1990 to the most draconian sanctions regime implemented in the history of the United Nations.

The complex circumstances surrounding Saddam Hussein's second serious miscalculation – his invasion of Iran in 1980 being the first – need to be examined in the wider international context.[1] As we described in Chapter 3, the start of the 1990s saw a dramatic decline in Soviet influence and involvement in the Middle East. President Gorbachev's twin policies of glasnost (greater openness and a measure of democratization) and perestroika (restructuring and liberalizing the economy) – the so-called 'new thinking' – started to loosen the grip of Moscow over the Soviet Empire, a process that was to reach its inevitable conclusion under his successor, Boris Yeltsin.[2] Soviet preoccupation with domestic upheaval and the need to encourage economic assistance from the West led to a scaling down of Cold War rhetoric and a willingness (opposed by old-style hardliners within the Soviet leadership) to seek cooperation rather than confrontation with the

Map F – Kuwait

United States. Following the Soviet disengagement from Afghanistan in 1988, Moscow, although still maintaining great power pretensions, became increasingly reluctant to take on new foreign commitments and was, indeed, unable to honour existing ones. This partial withdrawal from the world stage had serious implications for former traditional clients in the Middle East. Syria, Iraq, South Yemen and the PLO in particular could no longer look to the Soviet Union for economic and military aid, nor, as time went on, for effective diplomatic support.

The United States and its allies were also absorbed by developments within Eastern Europe throughout the first half of 1990, as influenced by evidence of dramatic change in Moscow. Despite political and economic turmoil within the Soviet Union and the increasingly obvious and seemingly inevitable decline of Soviet influence, Washington was not yet in a position to proclaim the existence of a 'new world order' – a now hackneyed expression referring to a structure of international politics dominated by one major

global player instead of two. But as Soviet power waned within the Middle East there were signs of Washington preparing to fill an impending vacuum through new contacts with Moscow's former 'clients', such as the PLO leadership and Syria. This was in preparation for a new attempt to kick-start the peace process, once again in abeyance against the backcloth of the Palestinian Intifada (described in Chapter 2). Not all Arabs welcomed the relentless rise of American influence at the expense of Soviet involvement. Many believed that Israel would be the main regional beneficiary of Washington's peace-brokering, which, with the eclipse of the USSR and the end of bipolarity, could operate unchallenged by any other international player, thus leading to the imposition of an unjust settlement on the Palestinians and their Arab supporters.

The Kuwait crisis has probably become the most analysed conflict in recent history, about which it has been claimed that more ink than blood has been spilt. One recurring theme in academic discourses is that contemporary observers, especially governmental ones, should have anticipated the invasion.[3] Surely, given Saddam's record of precipitate aggression and his rhetoric in the early months of 1990, Iraqi military action against the emirate was inevitable? But, despite the proliferation of hints and (with the benefit of hindsight) fairly strong indications, most people were still taken by surprise. We need to discuss briefly why this was so.

As described in the previous chapter, Saddam and his regime ended their pointless war against Iran as the self-proclaimed victors. But in truth Iraq had emerged from a close contest only marginally ahead on points. It had also been bankrupted by the conflict and for much of the period was largely dependent on very generous assistance from the Arab Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.[4] Iraq's pretensions as a regional superpower had foundered on the rock of Iranian opposition. There had been considerable popular internal opposition to a military adventure that had brought no measurable benefits to the country, and certainly not enough to compensate for the nationwide distress caused by thousands of casualties, considerable war damage and the crippling of the economy. Saddam, although pursuing plans to liberalize the political system partly to encourage more involvement by the Shi'as and to open up the economy, remained totally dependent on the support of an entrenched oligarchy and the regime's instruments of state oppression to maintain power. He survived at least one serious coup attempt between the end of the Iraq–Iran War and the invasion of Kuwait, and, despite his brutal crushing of the Kurdish separatists in 1988–9, he realized that further trouble from that quarter was only a matter of time.

Unabashed by his failure to persuade his neighbours to recognize Iraqi hegemony as the dominant regional power, though, Saddam began to strut on a bigger stage, seeking the leadership of the radical pack in the Arab

world. There followed vehement and strident attacks on Israel, coupled with a war of words with the USA, culminating in a resolution passed by the US Congress to impose sanctions on Baghdad because of Iraqi plans to manufacture weapons of mass destruction, including chemical weapons as used against Iran and the Kurds. Saddam also encouraged the external PLO leadership (based in Tunis) to look upon him as a major patron and to establish an important regional office in Baghdad, and exploited Iraq's membership of the Arab Cooperation Council (ACC) – a four-country grouping also including Jordan, Egypt and Yemen that was established in February 1989. Saddam used this platform to play to a wider Arab audience, turning up the volume on his anti-Israeli rhetoric and simultaneously seeking to outflank his long-standing Ba'athist rivals in Damascus, who had themselves for many years been predominant radicals.

Alarm bells started ringing in the Gulf and in the West when the extent of Iraq's crash rearmament programme became apparent in 1989 and early 1990. Despite severe economic problems exacerbated by depressed oil prices, the regime was spending vast sums of money on the purchase of sophisticated weapon systems, mainly from France and the USSR, and also seeking to acquire the technology to develop an in-house capability to produce its own. The Israelis in particular had expressed concern about Iraq's nuclear potential,[5] and its ability to produce and use chemical weapons was well documented. The regime's arrest and execution of an Iranian-British investigative journalist drew international attention to the existence of advanced armament-manufacturing facilities in Iraq,[6] as did the interception of items of technology from Western companies thought to be integral to the development of sophisticated long-range missiles and weapons of mass destruction. The Iraqi regime, courting Arab approval, made no secret of its ambitions to produce advanced weapon systems, saying they were necessary to combat the threat from Israel.

This policy was indeed widely supported throughout the region because of popular resentment against perceived Western, especially American, double standards: pressurizing Iraq, an important Arab country, to desist from enhancing its military capability while saying nothing about Israel, a country well believed to be in possession of nuclear weapons. Even Syria, Iraq's arch rival, publicly supported the latter's right to defend itself against an Israeli nuclear threat.

Increasingly, throughout the early months of 1990, Iraqi rhetoric had another target: its neighbour Kuwait. Relations had deteriorated since the end of the Iraq–Iran War. Even during the conflict Iraq had been angered by the refusal of its Kuwaiti ally to lease, or otherwise hand over, the two strategic islands of Warba and Bubiyan at the mouth of the Shatt al-Arab waterway, which would have been of considerable military value against

Iran. Iraq also demanded a renegotiation of the border with the emirate, claiming that, besides the erection of military installations on Iraqi territory, Kuwait was illegally exploiting the Rumeila oil field (partially straddled by the international frontier) – which, in its view, rightly belonged to Baghdad – and had 'stolen' US$2.4 billion worth of Iraqi oil. The most serious charge was that both Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) were over-producing oil, well beyond the quotas laid down by OPEC, and had done so since 1981, thus drastically and deliberately reducing Iraq's income. This was perceived in Baghdad as another act of robbery by Kuwait and the UAE. Baghdad also indicated that it expected its Gulf War financial backers to release Iraq from the huge debts it had incurred in 'defending them from Iranian aggression'. In mid-July 1990, just prior to an important OPEC council meeting, Iraq warned that it might take military action against any countries that continued to exceed oil quotas. Simultaneously, two Iraqi divisions (30,000 troops) were moved up to the border with Kuwait.

Most analysts agree on Saddam Hussein's motives for this aggressive posture.[7] Apart from a bid to assume a leadership role, they were primarily economic. He desperately needed to increase his oil income, well nigh Iraq's sole source of quick money in what amounted to a 'one-crop' economy, to finance his rearmament programme and address the damage caused to the Iraqi economy by eight years of war. Certainly, there was no way he could consider repaying the debts run up with Kuwait and his other Arab Gulf creditors. Strategic considerations also applied. One lesson learned from the war with Iran was that Iraq needed better territorial access to the Gulf to secure the sea approaches to the Shatt al-Arab. Readjustment of the border to include Warba and Bubiyan, plus the added economic bonus of absorbing the entire Rumeila oil field under Iraqi sovereignty, was an attractive proposition. These were powerful motivations, but did they justify going to war?

It seems unlikely that we will ever know for certain precisely when and exactly why Saddam decided to launch his invasion of Kuwait. Undoubtedly he was angered by Kuwait's stubborn refusal to bow to Iraqi pressure. The emirate insisted on repayment of Iraq's Gulf War debt as a precondition to discussing the border. It had announced plans for the development of Bubiyan. It continued to overproduce beyond the OPEC quota, only agreeing to toe the line at the OPEC meeting in July. And it was publicly robust in countering the Iraqi propaganda campaign. To some analysts, the extent of Kuwaiti robustness was surprising. Did the Amir have secret assurances of American military support? To others, Kuwaiti 'intransigence' – the refusal to concede an inch to Iraq's demands despite the increasingly urgent attempts by mediators to reach a compromise – served only to humiliate Saddam and provoke him into intemperate action.[8]

In the absence of authoritative primary-source Iraqi material, uncertainty will continue to surround Saddam's decision to order his forces into Kuwait. Was it long premeditated or an act of sudden impetuosity? Against the background of increasing Iraqi military build-up on the border with Kuwait there had been an apparently successful OPEC summit on 25 July (which raised the price of oil as demanded by Iraq). Nevertheless, the Iraqi tanks started to roll within twelve hours of an inconclusive meeting chaired by King Fahd of Saudi Arabia on 1 August between the Kuwaiti Crown Prince and the deputy chairman of Iraq's Revolutionary Command Council (RCC).[9] But one thing does seem probable: Saddam surely would not have attacked unless he believed he was going to get away with it.

It is on this point that conspiracy theories abound. Analysts have made much of a meeting between Saddam and the US Ambassador to Iraq, April Glaspie, on 25 July. Did she give a virtual green light to Saddam to pursue his quarrel with Kuwait without fear of US intervention?[10] She evidently believed from Saddam's reaction, which she reported to Washington, that there was no immediate danger of military action, as she promptly departed Iraq on leave.[11] Our view is that Saddam completely miscalculated the likely Western and indeed Arab governments' response to his act of aggression, believing that no one would reckon Kuwait was worth a fight. Or, if they did, that they would hesitate to take on the might of the Iraqi armed forces, said to be the world's fourth largest, with more than a million men under arms. He may well have intended to teach the Kuwaitis a lesson and withdraw his forces after achieving a readjustment of the disputed frontier in Iraq's favour, following the installation of a puppet government and the writing off of his debt. Subsequent manoeuvres seem to indicate that this was his intention, but it was frustrated by developments that Saddam had simply failed to anticipate.

Space does not permit a detailed account of events from the Iraqi seizure of Kuwait on 2 August 1990 to its liberation as a result of Operation Desert Storm on 28 February 1991. There are, however, several features that are worth highlighting – notably the unprecedented nature of the international response to Saddam's aggression. It came as no surprise that Washington reacted swiftly and angrily. Iraq possessed the second-largest oil reserves in the world (perhaps 10 per cent of the total), a position significantly enhanced by its seizure of Kuwait (nearly another 10 per cent) and its prolific oil fields. The United States relied on imports for about 50 per cent of its oil requirements and it was unacceptable for it to be potentially held to ransom by a maverick autocrat like the Iraqi leader. Moreover, it seemed possible in early August that Saddam, with his forces poised on the southern Kuwaiti border, was contemplating adding the even larger oil fields of Saudi Arabia to his conquests. American allies in the West were also highly alarmed and

needed little persuasion to join forces with Washington in confronting the Iraqi regime – initially via the UN Security Council and subsequently in the Desert Shield/Desert Storm military coalition.

It was the Arab reaction to the attack by an Arab on a brother that dramatically changed the traditional pattern of regional alliances. For the first time since the creation of the Arab League, conservative regimes such as the Gulf monarchies made common cause with radical states like Syria and Libya.[12] Normally conservative monarchist Jordan, influenced by enthusiastic popular support for Saddam, refused to join in the condemnation of Iraq and opposed US and other Western involvement, calling for an 'Arab solution' to the crisis. In the circumstances of total disarray in the Arab world this was oxymoronic, to say the least. Two emergency meetings of the Arab League illustrated the lack of common purpose. The first, on the day after the invasion, saw six out of the twenty-one members voting against the resolution to condemn the invasion and insist on Iraq's unconditional withdrawal (Jordan, Mauritania, Sudan, Yemen, the PLO and Iraq itself), while Libya abstained. At the second summit meeting on 10 August, twelve of the participants voted to send a deterrent force to Saudi Arabia to support the build-up of primarily American troops preparing to defend the kingdom against possible Iraqi attack. On this occasion Libya declined to send soldiers, but called upon Saddam to withdraw his forces.

Official hostility to Iraq, as reflected by the actions of a majority of Arab governments, was not an accurate reflection of popular sentiment in many of these states. Two factors influenced the public mood. First, there was a widespread lack of genuine sympathy for Kuwait. The emirate was widely disliked for its perceived arrogance, its unconvincing pretensions to non-alignment and patronizing use of its great oil wealth. Its treatment of resident guest workers and the large Palestinian community as third-class citizens also raised hackles. Kuwait's refusal to show any flexibility in its dispute with Iraq engendered a common feeling that it had done much needlessly to provoke Baghdad. Second, Saddam, despite his surprise at the robustness of the international response, demonstrated considerable skill in mobilizing Arab street opinion in his support.

Saddam originally claimed he had sent forces into Kuwait in response to an appeal by patriotic insurgents who had overthrown the 'corrupt' Sabah regime. However, having failed to establish a client regime consisting of credible Kuwaitis he proceeded to Plan B, he announced that Kuwait had been 'reunited' with its motherland Iraq; in other words, annexed to become Baghdad's nineteenth province. Iraq had thus reclaimed its birthright, and one of the artificial borders created by colonialists had been liquidated in the interests of pan-Arab unity.[13] He also sought to attract regional support by creating major linkage between his Kuwait operation and the wider Middle

East dispute. In effect he proposed an Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait in exchange for, at the very least, an international conference on Palestine. However, this proposal was rejected out of hand by the United States and its Western allies, who wanted nothing to do with any idea that might be seen to reward Iraqi aggression and enhance its standing in the region. It struck a populist chord, however, especially in Jordan, the West Bank and Gaza and the Maghreb states. As the crisis developed, the Iraqi leader continued to play to a popular gallery by posing as the new Arab champion prepared to stand up to Western bullies, the traditional supporters of Israel, against overwhelming odds. Subsequent 'Scud' missile attacks on Israel after the outbreak of war immensely enhanced his standing in many Arab streets. He also sought through his rhetoric to add an Islamic dimension to the conflict, invoking an image of a new Saladin fighting a jihad against the Crusader West. As part of this campaign he added the phrase 'Allah Akbar' (God Is Great) to the Iraqi flag. Given the perceived overwhelmingly secular nature of the Iraqi establishment, this was probably the least successful of his ploys.

But, despite his manoeuvring, Saddam made little impression on the wider international community. The UN Security Council quickly established the most comprehensive regime of sanctions ever imposed on a member state, passing a raft of unopposed resolutions. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait served as a catalyst to draw the American and Soviet former rivals together, and there was no clearer indication that some kind of 'new world order' had been created than the disappearance of references to 'East' and 'West' from the discussion of international crisis management. However, such harmony was more of an indication that the Soviet star was on the wane and more pre-occupied with domestic issues than any real meeting of minds in Washington and Moscow.

Although the international community, including the Security Council, called for a peaceful outcome to the crisis, seeking unconditional Iraqi withdrawal, the build-up to military confrontation was inevitable. By the beginning of 1991, 700,000 Desert Shield coalition forces had assembled – mostly in Saudi Arabia – far outnumbering the half a million Iraqi troops thought by then to be in Kuwait. A multinational armada of 200 naval ships had also been sent to the Gulf. Reports of Iraqi brutality in Kuwait, Saddam's abuse of civilian hostages trapped in the country and plans to use them as potential 'human shields' to deter military attack, plus his refusal, despite many attempts at mediation, to withdraw from the emirate on acceptable terms hardened international opinion against him. Moreover, the US leadership stepped up the pressure for military action, fearing that a long stalemate (which sanctions seemed unlikely to end) would erode public support for armed conflict. The legal basis for going to war was provided by Security

Council Resolution (SCR) 678 of 29 November 1990, which authorized 'all necessary means' to liberate Kuwait. Last-minute mediation attempts, notably by the Soviet Union, failed to prevent the outbreak of hostilities, codenamed 'Operation Desert Storm', on 16–17 January 1991.

The war was nasty, brutal and short. The forty-day air campaign consisting of over 90,000 missions wreaked havoc on Iraq's military and industrial infrastructure. Iraq's only effective counter – the use of the Scud missile – was nearly successful in widening the war by involving Israel, which was restrained from direct retaliation only by massive US military assistance. Of course, if Israel had been provoked into attacking Iraq, this would have gravely threatened the cohesion of the Arab–Western alliance. The overwhelmingly one-sided aerial assault, with more bombs dropped than during the Second World War, was followed by the 100-hour rout of the land campaign, which led to the liberation of Kuwait. This campaign inflicted heavy casualties on the fleeing Iraqi contingents of what proved to be a paper tiger of a military machine quite incapable of fighting the 'Mother of all Battles' proclaimed by their leader.[14]

Saddam had not committed the 'crack' Republican Guard to the defence of Kuwait (nor did he deploy biological or chemical weapons) – wisely, as it transpired, as it was needed to crush revolts in the predominantly Shi'a south of Iraq and by the Kurds in the north. The US-led coalition was criticized in some quarters for neither pressing on to Baghdad to remove Saddam nor assisting these rebellions. But the first was not within the mandate of SCR 678 and the USA with memories of Vietnam, was reluctant (in both cases) to be involved in what could become long-term messy campaigns. This was despite US President George Bush's apparent encouragement of the uprisings when he addressed the Iraqi people following the ceasefire, although it seems unlikely that either the Shi'as or the Kurds needed much prompting to take advantage of what must have seemed a good opportunity to assert themselves. Moreover, Washington did not wish to see Iraq disintegrate. Eventually the Americans and British provided some protection for the Shi'as and the Kurds via the establishment of 'no-fly zones' in the south and north of Iraq. They later also created a safe haven for the Kurds, barring Iraqi aircraft from both sectors.

In the decade following Desert Storm little of real substance changed in the region. Above all, the same divisions in the Arab world were still apparent; although, admittedly, the Jordanian and Palestinian leaderships eventually managed to mend most of the fences damaged by their stance during the crisis. The Jordanians also successfully absorbed 300,000 Palestinian–Jordanian refugees expelled or refused permission to return to Kuwait, where they had been long-term residents. But there was no Arab or indeed wider international consensus on how to deal with Iraq. Popular

attitudes and the views of elites and regimes remained far apart. And more than a decade of draconian sanctions linked to the dismantling of Iraq's arms industry damaged, but probably did not destroy, Saddam's capacity to produce weapons of mass destruction. (Although it remains a mystery when and where they were destroyed.) Up to the Allied invasion of 2003, he remained entrenched in power with little apparent prospect of departure. The sanctions were widely perceived to have been more damaging to his people than harmful to the regime, and led to widespread public sympathy, in the West as well as in the Arab world, for the ordinary Iraqis who failed to benefit from the humanitarian provisions of the sanctions legislation. The UN, including governments previously supportive of the coalition, grew increasingly divided over confronting and punishing Iraq, especially on the issue of how to enforce an effective arms inspection and monitoring regime. Two intensive (Anglo-American) air campaigns after 1991 to enforce Iraqi co-operation with the UN both failed to achieve their objectives. And subsequent aggressive enforcement of the no-fly zones by US and British warplanes attracted widespread international criticism, even though they probably protected the Kurds from serious Iraqi government interference. Ultimately, when George W. Bush's administration launched its full-scale attack on Iraq in March 2003, it did so without the endorsement of the UN.

Hopes in the West that one outcome of the defeat of Iraq would be significant democratization in the region have largely been dashed. In 1991, US and other Western commentators expressed unease about going to war on behalf of monarchical regimes that seemed almost as autocratic as their Iraqi enemy. Although the National Assembly was restored in Kuwait, its narrow, male-only franchise remained unchanged until the emancipation of women voters in 2005 – and only then after stiff resistance from conservative elements. There has also been timid liberalization in Qatar and Oman, and more so in Bahrain (even after the Amir elevated his status to that of King), but Saudi Arabia and the UAE remain monolithically undemocratic. Significant constitutional liberalization in Jordan began in 1989, a year before the start of the first Gulf conflict, but continued popular support for Iraq was a factor in renewed authoritarianism by the late King Hussein and his successor. One positive outcome was the relaunch of the Middle East peace process, but that reflected the new unchallenged predominance of the USA as the main external player in the region, as well as Palestinian impotence, rather than any recognition of the validity of Saddam's 'linkage' between the Gulf and developments in the Levant. As Cordesman argued in the wake of the coalition's victory, 'Like it or not, the US is the only nation that can assemble and project enough power to meet any aggressor. While Americans may not want to be the world's policeman, they must consider what it could be like to live in a world without any policeman at all.'[15]

Indeed, the very visible dominance of the United States is the most striking legacy of the part that Washington played in orchestrating and prosecuting Desert Storm at the beginning of the 1990s. Without continual US pressure it is unlikely that the countries of the region, with the exception of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, would have made their peace with Iraq by the turn of the century. US insistence also held together the sanctions regime, ragged at the edges though it eventually became. North American commercial interests riding on the back of US military and political influence substantially increased their share of an already lucrative market. Washington never ceased to remind its friends and allies in the Arab Gulf that its ready help at times of trouble merited commercial recompense, whether through yet more purchases of military hardware or by the award of very large civil contracts to US companies.

Nor was Washington reluctant to remind the Gulf monarchies of its role as protector of last resort in the face of the threat that Saddam Hussein was still believed to present to the region despite his crushing defeat in 1991. Sanctions could help to keep Saddam in his cage but only the USA had the muscle to put him back behind bars whenever he might try to break out. So, to a great extent, as some cynics have argued, it suited the USA before 9/11 to have the neighbourhood bully still at large, thus justifying its position as the policeman on the block. By the end of the twentieth century, Saddam had shown no signs of an early departure from a scene he had dominated so long. However, the start of the new millennium and the arrival of a new US administration, headed by veterans of the first Gulf War, appears to have initiated, after the dramatic events of 9/11, a countdown towards the inevitable conflict we describe in Chapter 10. Even without the events of 9/11, many believed that it was only a matter of time before the administration of George W. Bush finished the business with Iraq that had been started by his father a decade earlier. Such an argument has even been proposed by the ex-Treasury Secretary of the Bush administration, Paul O'Neill, who claimed in 2004 that 'from the very beginning [of the Bush government, in 2001] there was a conviction that Saddam Hussein was a bad person and that he needed to go'.[16] As we see in the next two chapters, Bush had at least achieved this, if little else of a positive nature, by the beginning of 2007.

10 No end to the storm

9/11 and the war in Iraq

> And after these things I saw another angel come down from heaven, having great power; and the earth was lightened with his glory. And he cried mightily with a strong voice, saying, Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird. For all nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth are waxed rich through the abundance of her delicacies.
>
> Book of Revelation, XVIII, King James Bible

Post-1945, the day the world appeared to pause and understand again the frailty of human life was 11 September 2001, when members of an Islamist terror organization named al-Qaeda (the Base) led by Usama bin Laden launched a series of attacks on New York and Washington. Hundreds lost their lives on the three planes that were hijacked and crashed by the hijackers into buildings that symbolized American military, economic and political power. Thousands in total died as a result of the attack. The American people experienced a direct sense of terrifying vulnerability, but the shock waves were felt worldwide.

The instant judgement on the terrorist attacks was that they 'changed everything'.[1] The twentieth-century tradition of nation-states in conflict had been, at a stroke, transformed into the twenty-first-century fear of a new world disorder, with the prospect of the 'evil' forces of fanatical transnational terrorism challenging the established basis of civilized society on an unprecedented scale. In this instance, the shadowy network of al-Qaeda was perceived as taking on 'the West', as represented by the United States of America. In this sense 'the West' was understood as representative of values that bin Laden and his cohorts contested. The locus of the new conflict, the seed-bed of Islamist hate, the region that spawned the callous suicide-bombers, was the Middle East.

The 'Middle Eastern and Islamist connection' to the attacks, assumed from the outset, resonated strongly throughout such Western capitals as Washington, London and Rome. In this respect the Middle East was once again perceived in many quarters as a harbinger of conflict, with Islamic dimensions to boot. This revived notions of a clash of civilizations, with Islam and the West facing each other across an ever-widening chasm. Under this notion the West led and Islam trailed in the wake of the progressive, democratic and plural values of the new world order shaped by non-Muslim power. Indeed, following the attacks, Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi declared, 'We must be aware of the superiority of our civilization, a system that has guaranteed well-being, respect for human rights and – in contrast with Islamic countries – respect for religious and political rights.'[2]

The response from quarters of the international community made vulnerable by al-Qaeda's attacks was to declare a 'global war on terrorism'. In an address to the American nation after the attacks, US President George W. Bush outlined the scale of the conflict with terrorism, declaring that, 'This is not, however, just America's fight. And what is at stake is not just America's freedom. This is the world's fight. This is civilization's fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom.' Thus the war on terrorism was declared and President Bush outlined in stark terms the American position to states in the international order, including those of the Middle East: 'You're either with us or against us in the fight against terror.'[3] The mood in Washington, or more specifically within the dominant elements of the Bush administration, now mattered more than ever in terms of the prospects for conflict and peacemaking in the Middle East. It has been noted that, 'Since the al-Qaeda attacks Americans have thought differently about their vulnerability, their power and the need to use that power in faraway places in order to feel safe at home. Because America has changed, the world has changed too.'[4] The greatest change, with major implications for the Middle East, was the feeling in Washington of confidence, almost triumphalism, springing from the success of the initial stages of the war on terrorism. The campaign against the Taliban government and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan was launched within three months of 9/11 and waged by a US-led coalition allied to anti-Taliban elements within the country itself.

Self-congratulation was perhaps not out of place at that time. The rapid removal of the Taliban regime from power, with negligible loss of Allied lives, was a remarkable accomplishment. It was achieved despite concern that the Allied coalition could, like the Russians before them, be sucked into a long, bloody campaign with the odds stacked against them. With the ejection of the Taliban as the governing force and the installation of a new, broad interim governing force (the Loya Jirga), the main task appeared to have

been achieved in terms of Afghanistan being understood as the seat of terror in this region. Usama bin Laden also lost out on a wider front. Despite his appeals, there were no uprisings against moderate Muslim regimes with close links to the West, which he stigmatized as being part of a 'Zionist–Crusader alliance'. The jihad, as a form of conflict undertaken by ordinary Muslims in the Middle East, never materialized. The anti-Western demonstrations that were staged in a number of Muslim countries were few in number and lacked the fervour for which bin Laden must have hoped. (Nevertheless, the fact that they took place at all contributed to a sense of disquiet and alarm in the United States of America.) Countless Muslim leaders and preachers, as well as ordinary people, condemned bin Laden's act as terrorism, not jihad, and accused him of bringing the name of Islam into terrible disrepute. Even elements of radical Islamism distanced themselves from such deeds and refuted claims that *their* struggles, *their* resistance, even if undertaken by violent means, could be equated with the atrocities perpetrated by al-Qaeda on American targets. However, the reaction to the 2003 invasion of Iraq was on an entirely different scale.

As we noted in Chapter 3, the perceived success on the Afghan front encouraged elements of the Bush administration to widen the war on terrorism. 'Axis of evil' references to Iraq, Iran and North Korea in Bush's statements jarred in the Middle East and he was widely ridiculed for his jingoistic 'OK Corral' presentation. But this was not just chest thumping. The jungle drums conveyed a serious message. The epithet 'axis of evil', reminiscent of President Reagan's memorable description of the former Soviet Union as an 'evil empire', together with deliberate leaks of a US Pentagon 'hit-list' of nuclear targets in a number of 'rogue' or potentially rogue states signalled Washington's resolve to deal severely with any government that it assumed presented a grave threat to its security.[5] A threat to security was taken as meaning, among other things, unconcealed or clandestine support for movements such as al-Qaeda, or a whole host of other groups from the Middle East region designated as 'terrorist'. In this respect most states of the region, and a significant number of non-state actors, would fall under the scope of the USA.

Indeed, by 2003, the FBI list of foreign organizations designated as 'terrorist' by the USA featured twenty-eight names, of which eighteen originated or were based in the Middle East. Also officially threats to security were any states thought to be in possession of or developing weapons of mass destruction (WMD), which, because of the disposition of the regimes in question, could find their way into the hands of terrorists. There was a particular fear of an 'un-Holy' alliance between transnational terror elements such as al-Qaeda and the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. In this case, and at that time, there was a lack of hard intelligence specifically linking the Iraq

ruling clique to bin Laden, and the ideological chasm between a religiously motivated extremist and a secular regime tended to be overlooked. However, as has been the case elsewhere among disparate radical groups, the one issue that was presumed to unite such unlikely bedfellows was their anti-Americanism. It was bin Laden's supposed links with Saddam Hussein that President Bush had primarily in mind as he asserted on 11 March 2002: 'the war will not be over when the terrorist networks are disrupted, scattered and discredited but when the sources of the weapons of mass destruction they are seeking to obtain have been removed as well'.[6] This pronouncement represented a new focus on the Middle East. Finding friendly governments in the region that would be ready to prosecute the war on terrorism alongside the USA would be important. Yet, the prospect of an increased American presence in the Arab world, irrespective of the intent, alarmed many Arab leaders. Only the leadership in Israel seemed to find solace in the prospect that the USA could take up arms in the region and prosecute military conflicts against some of its main enemies. Even on this front, however, there were tensions as the American administration urged restraint in the Israeli government's attitude to the Palestinians, while busily courting Arab support for an international coalition against the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

One of the more immediate manifestations of new conflicts in the Middle East – between an actor external to the region and state and non-state actors within it – occurred in Yemen. There the USA turned to the governing authorities and applied pressure on them to cooperate in the war on terrorism. Since late 2001 hundreds of US special forces have been stationed in Yemen (and neighbouring Djibouti), undertaking the training of Yemeni special forces as well as manning their own missions against suspected Islamist elements. This has led to the government being targeted by anti-American and Islamist elements as 'stooges' of the USA and generated new tensions in an already fractious region. Yemeni political stability has never been taken for granted and, only a decade on from the reunification of the country, destabilization was an ever-present prospect. Continued American involvement could create new problems in the not-too-distant future.

The US government was also anxious to build and maintain a long-term international alliance against terrorism. When the Taliban had been routed (albeit temporarily) in Afghanistan, the Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and his regime came into the frame as 'Public Enemy Number One' in the US hit-list of 'rogue states'. President Clinton's policy of containment in respect of Iran and Iraq was now replaced with one of active and aggressive confrontation. With that came consideration of pre-emption. Elements within the US administration who had been deeply engaged in the events of 1990–1, such as Donald Rumsfeld, now seemed determined to finish what

had been started by the first President Bush. Figures such as Paul Wolfowitz, who had served as Under-Secretary of Defense for Policy during Desert Storm and helped to shape US policy, outlined their position on Iraq as self-confessed 'hawks' who made clear their determination to achieve regime change in Baghdad. The neo-conservatives, the hard men of the American right and in alliance with the 'Christian Zionist' fundamentalists, were to have a profound effect on US policy towards the Arab world. To what extent this aligned with the broader goals of the war on terrorism, the notion of threat to American security or economic and strategic considerations and ambitions as they related to the Middle East would become clear as the case for military action against Iraq was proposed by the US administration (along with British Prime Minister Tony Blair) to the court of world opinion. However, much as the USA wanted to carry a respectable body of international support with it, especially in the Islamic world, the bottom line appeared to be that if its traditional friends could not or would not help (including a largely unconvinced UN Security Council), it was prepared to do the job itself.[7]

At first it appeared that old alliances would endorse the US spearhead against Iraq. Through astute diplomatic endeavour, the USA and UK were able to secure a unanimous Security Council resolution (SCR 1441) on 8 November 2002, in which the UN stipulated that Iraq must disarm, with provision for further UN action in case of non-compliant Iraqi behaviour. The resolution was designed to restart the UN weapons inspections and disarmament process that had halted in 1998. The other dimension to this was to increase pressure for the maintenance of the UN sanctions regime against Iraq. UN data itself demonstrated that the sanctions, or rather (as some would argue) how they had been implemented by the Iraqi regime, had made conditions for ordinary Iraqis similar to those in a poorly resourced refugee camp. But, in the event, SCR 1441 was not the 'green light' for military action that many in the Anglo-American camp believed it to be. Encouraged by the adoption of SCR 1441, the case for war was being furiously constructed in Washington and London, with regime change, weapons of mass destruction, human rights abuses and other issues cited as reasons for seeking a pre-emptive conflict on Iraq and the regime of Saddam Hussein. As diplomatic pressure grew and UN Security Council members such as France and Russia remained unconvinced by the case for war against Iraq, Dr Hans Blix, heading the UN weapons inspection team, also asked for more time. Yet, by early March 2003, Britain and the USA (along with other, much smaller contingent Allied forces) were strategically located in the Middle East, with only the reluctance of Turkey to allow a US military presence on its territory hampering the war plans. At the UN the failure to obtain the necessary votes dissuaded Britain and the USA from

pursuing a Security Council resolution sanctioning military action under the auspices of the United Nations.

By 17 March, preparations for war were well advanced and the prospect of sustaining peace in the Arab Gulf waned as UN personnel were ordered out of Iraq. Thousands of British and American troops took up positions in northern Kuwait, diplomats packed their bags and the massed ranks of the international press corps arrived in Doha and Kuwait City. Whether the war would be short or long, would bring the region to the brink of international crisis, would lead to the toppling of regimes and the visible increase of American power in the Middle East were all questions that were then unanswerable. There were fears that if Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction of a biological or chemical variety, then he would employ them – precisely the same fears which were expressed over a decade earlier as the land war of February 1991 got under way. There were also worries that America would end up engaged in a long-term conflict that would become increasingly unpopular at home, in which their military superiority would be undermined by local guerrilla tactics, as had happened in Vietnam. Moreover, there was a conviction in some quarters that a war against Iraq would do more to engender conflict in the Middle East – and *from* the Middle East, as perpetrated by terrorist elements – than ever before. This vision was outlined by the Vatican, which declared:

> One can foresee the destabilisation of the entire Middle East because the more politicised Islamic masses, which already harbour a deep hate for the West, will see it as an act of war against Islam and against Arab and Muslim countries . . . The gravest consequence of a war against Iraq, however, would be a flare-up of terrorism against the United States and against allied Western countries.[8]

These were prophetic words indeed. Four years on, Iraq was immobilized by insurgency and civil war and was still occupied by thousands of foreign troops. And terrorists claiming the invasion of Iraq as a primary motive had perpetrated atrocities in Spain, the UK and elsewhere.

Nevertheless, on 19 March 2003, the USA took the initiative, launching missile strikes against targets in Baghdad, and in the first weeks of the war Allied military gains were made at some cost to the civilian population as well as Iraqi military conscripts. There was a moment of disquiet in the second week of the war when it appeared that, after taking Umm Qasr and Basra to the south of the country, military victory in the rest would not be swift. In reality, though, there was merely a military pause before the assault on Baghdad. Concerns about a new Stalingrad failed to be borne out as the

Iraqi defence of the capital disintegrated, with even allegedly elite units refusing to fight. The only determined opposition come from Ba'ath Party, irregular units and some foreign Arab fighters. The regime's elite seemed to evaporate literally overnight between 9 and 10 April, most tellingly symbolized by the overnight disappearance of the Iraqi Information Minister Mohammed Sahaf, the infamous voice of the regime. Even as Baghdad burned before his eyes and with US tanks less than a kilometre away, he announced to the global media that the city was safe. He had labelled the British and US leadership 'an international gang of criminal bastards, blood-sucking bastards, ignorant imperialists, losers and fools'.[9] With the fall of Baghdad a few hours later, and the capitulation of the northern cities of Mosul, Tikrit (the hometown of Saddam Hussein and many others in the regime) and Irbil within the week, military war was all but over.

Yet the fall of Baghdad, the capture of Kirkuk and the end of the regime of Saddam Hussein did not mean that the campaign had successfully run its course, as we shall see later. Its repercussions in the Middle East were keenly felt. First, the implications of regime change pursued and achieved by America began to sink in. As David Frum, a former presidential speech-writer, noted: 'an American-led overthrow of Saddam Hussein . . . would put America more wholly in charge of the region than any power since the Ottomans, or maybe the Romans'.[10] Indeed, the sense that America was enjoying unprecedented authority over a number of regimes in the Middle East was overwhelming, with important implications for future conflicts and peacemaking. Within weeks of the fall of Baghdad the American spotlight was falling on Damascus, with demands on President Bashar al-Assad to crack down on certain elements within his country. Then there was news that American troops would now be deployed out of Saudi Arabia, with many cynics pointing to Iraq as the new location for a US military presence in the Gulf. One conflict in particular, the Palestinian–Israeli dimension of the Arab–Israeli dispute, would once again come to the forefront of many minds in the region. The extent of power, as held in American hands, would now assume new dimensions. However, in reality, the next four years would expose both that power's limitations and its abuse, in Iraq, in Lebanon, in the Israeli–Palestinian arena, in Yemen, and indeed in Afghanistan.

The extent to which the ordinary people of Iraq and the country in general have suffered since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime and the American-led war against the country can be summed up by reflecting on a variety of statistics as well as human stories. Since 2003 over 3,000 American troops have been killed in Iraq and many more have been injured. Some might argue that such casualties are to be expected during war but not in the rebuilding of the Iraqi state. Clearly concern over this issue motivated American voters to elect the Democrats to the US Congress in 2006. The death toll of Iraqi

civilians post-war, however, simply defies belief. The most conservative current estimate runs at 100,000 deaths, but a study in the highly respected medical journal *The Lancet* concluded that this figure had been reached as early as October 2004 (*The Lancet*, 28 October 2004). Two years later, Johns Hopkins University (cited in the *Washington Post*, 10 October 2006) estimated that 655,000 Iraqis had died since the end of the war in 2003. Over 1.8 million Iraqis have undeniably become refugees (including many key professionals, such as doctors and engineers) and a further 1.6 million are internally displaced from their homes, their families and their livelihoods. Fear and paralysis of the state infrastructure and economy mean that the country has fractured and the state is imperilled. The infrastructure, devastated by the war and by the subsequent insurgency, has not been restored to its pre-war state; although electricity generation is at about 2003 levels, there are frequent power cuts. In oil-rich Iraq petrol is in short supply, with motorists having to queue for it for hours. And the government elected as a result of remarkably well-supported elections – given the lack of security and much intimidation – has a remit which barely runs outside the capital. Perhaps inevitably, politics and government are now a sectarian affair. There may be a democratically elected Iraqi government, but without the support of coalition forces, predominantly US, it would struggle to survive, having seen its authority seriously eroded by a sectarian conflict that it seems wholly unable to bring under control. The anti-regime insurgency has been fuelled by about 3,000 foreign militants, from whose ranks it is believed that most of the seemingly inexhaustible supply of suicide-bombers originate. But the insurgency is not a one-sided affair, with both Sunni and Shi'a elements mounting attacks against the coalition forces and their contractors across the country. Total collapse of the government (a serious possibility) would probably lead to a disintegration of the Iraqi state into areas of Sunni, Shi'a and Kurdish influence, with all the further ethnic cleansing this would inevitably entail. This in turn would raise the spectre of intervention from other regional players: Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia among them. Such fears have already prompted these external actors to seek to influence the situation within Iraq.

With the deterioration of the situation in Iraq, support for the war among coalition member countries continued to fall. Disillusion with US/UK policy in particular dated from the eventual revelation that Saddam did not possess weapons of mass destruction, certainly in 2003, so the assault against Iraq was both an illegal and a pointless campaign. The supposed existence of Iraqi WMD had been the primary *casus belli*. In Washington, the report by the Baker–Hamilton Iraq Study Group,[11] commissioned by President Bush and published on 6 December 2006, displayed a belated realization that the war was not being won. However, the President's response to calls

for an urgent exit strategy was to insist that the only reasonable policy was to 'stay the course', although it was difficult to see how this could be achieved by an administration which had lost its Republican majority in the Senate and House in the mid-term elections of late 2006. With no bipartisan support for plans to increase the number of US forces, the so-called 'surge' planned for 2007, especially in Baghdad, involving one final push to defeat the insurgents and stop the inter-factional hostilities while accelerating the training of more Iraqi security forces to take over from the coalition and allow its withdrawal or redeployment, seemed unlikely to succeed.

The much predicted mess that the war has made of Iraq has truly imperilled the chances for peace and stability in the region. With the wisdom of hindsight, it can be seen that the US-dominated coalition made a number of serious mistakes following its military victory. The dismantling of almost the entire Ba'ath Party infrastructure, including much of the civil service, armed forces and police, for basically doctrinaire reasons put many desperately needed people on the streets immediately and left them at odds with the new administration. This meant having to rebuild the security forces and much of the civil service from scratch while attempting to control an emerging insurgency. It is now also apparent that the Americans from the outset, did not have a proper post-war reconstruction plan or the number of troops to control the country effectively. The occupation administration, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), which was in power before the installation of an Iraqi government, was clumsy and lacked vision, with the occupiers seemingly unwilling to try to understand Iraqi civil and religious society. An obsession with combating 'Islamic radical fundamentalism' unnecessarily made enemies of powerful groups, such as the followers of Moqtada al-Sadr, a prominent Shi'a cleric who, despite being a major-power broker, was studiously ignored by Paul Bremner, the US 'proconsul' who headed the CPA and should have recognized Sadr as a natural ally following the overthrow of an oppressive Sunni minority regime. The lack of American expertise and the fact that the military seemed to call most of the shots ensured that the CPA failed to find any answer for a society in turmoil. With a strong central government removed at a stroke, all the old centrifugal tendencies of a largely artificial entity resurfaced, exacerbated by factional infighting – the dispossessed (from political power) Sunnis increasingly at odds with the triumphant, resurgent Shi'as, so long oppressed by Saddam and his predecessors. Added to this was an increasingly effective and popular insurgency, with a number of al-Qaeda elements, many of them from outside Iraq, delighted to be given the chance to get at the Western occupiers of an Arab country at such close quarters.

As for the Americans, in popular perception at least, they seemed to be intent more on bolstering their strategic position in the Arab world while

inter alia safeguarding US access to Arab oil and establishing permanent bases for their forces than putting Iraq back on its feet. Billions of US dollars were earmarked for development and reconstruction, but the UN and other agencies, often the targets for insurgent hostility, were increasingly unwilling to expose their staffs to the dangers of working outside the Green Zone, while commercial civil contractors faced similar problems that severely curtailed their effectiveness. There are suggestions that much of this money has yet to be accounted for and there is little enough to show for it on the ground. Nor was the American image helped by its inactivity in the Middle East peace process and seeming complicity with Israeli excesses on the West Bank. The Baker–Hamilton Report recommended that the USA should engage with Iraq's neighbours, Syria and Iran, to elicit their help in trying to resolve the conflict. But President Bush still resorted to the old rhetoric decrying Syria for its alleged assistance to the insurgents in Iraq and its support for Hizballah in its anti-Israeli activities. Iran was similarly fingered for arming and encouraging Shi'a militants in Iraq, and for supporting groups fighting Israel, whether Palestinian or Lebanese. But the big issue for Washington became Iran's nuclear programme, which was believed to be for the production of weapons rather than power generation. Nevertheless, Washington may yet come to see that Damascus and Tehran need to be engaged, not only to help the USA extricate itself from the Iraqi morass but to kick-start the peace process. As we have reiterated a number of times, deal positively and fairly with the Palestinians and Israelis within the framework of a two-state solution and much of the heat of anti-Americanism will evaporate in the Arab world. But this is a tall order for what is increasingly a lame-duck administration.

Iraq is not the only problem George W. Bush has faced during his time in office. A significant casualty of the 9/11 attacks has been the Middle East peace process. Before September 2001, the second Palestinian Intifada had already erupted. Palestinian violent resistance to the continued occupation of the West Bank and the hopeless stalemate in negotiations resulted in increasingly aggressive Israeli government military action, leading to unprecedented, mostly civilian casualties. Palestinian suicide-bombers were becoming a familiar phenomenon, inflicting horrific carnage mostly against Israeli civilians – and these acts inevitably led to instant, severe military retaliation.

Then came 9/11. The Israeli government, sensing a major tactical advantage, was quick to align Israel with the USA in the war on terrorism. Palestinian political violence was increasingly conflated with the threat posed by al-Qaeda.[12] Israel, and the powerful Israeli lobby in the USA, enthusiastically embraced and endorsed a simplistic view prevalent mostly on the American (and Israeli) right, with neo-conservatives and Christian Zionists

to the fore, that indiscriminately lumped together many dissident elements, mostly with Islamic connections and, for the main part, Arabs. As Camille Mansour has put it: 'Sharon immediately concluded that the new situation allowed him to claim that he was in the front line against terrorism. He now had *carte blanche* to set the rules of the game in the Palestinian–Israeli sphere . . . while loudly proclaiming that Arafat was Israel's Bin Laden.'[13] The most striking manifestation of Israeli policy post-9/11 was the effort to marginalize Arafat and to degrade his security apparatus. Later, Sharon even tried to drive him into exile: from December until early May 2002, Israeli tanks besieged the PLO leader, confining him to his office complex in Ramallah. Punitive Israeli air strikes targeted Arafat's security forces and destroyed much of the Palestinian Authority's infrastructure. At the same time, though, the Israelis demanded that the neutered Palestinian authorities rein in radical elements like Hamas and Islamic Jihad. In pursuing these tough tactics, Sharon appeared to be acting with US acquiescence, if not active support. On the Palestinian side, suicide attacks deep into Israel and guerrilla raids on Jewish settlements and military outposts increased as part of the spiral of violence and counter-violence.

These conflagrations, covered on prime-time television, forced a reluctant US intervention in the form of Colin Powell, the US Secretary of State. This high-profile regional swing was a watershed for the Bush administration with regard to the Palestinian–Israeli conflict as the USA had previously adopted a hands-off approach to conflict management rather than resolution.[14] The Israeli reoccupation of the West Bank in April 2002 changed that. Many Arab capitals erupted in anti-Israeli and anti-US demonstrations in support of the Palestinians, and the potential for destabilization forced the USA to act. As far as many in the administration were concerned, the Middle East peace process was a lower priority than dealing with Iraq, but even the hardliners realized there was no hope of any Arab support for a new confrontation with Baghdad – even from traditional friends in the region – unless the USA could be seen to be actively involved in reviving it. The degree of US even-handedness mattered little. The onus was inevitably placed on the Palestinians to undertake a series of changes and reforms (some much needed) in a climate of daily Israeli measures against their civilian population. In the spring of 2003 the promise of a 'roadmap' for peace was announced by the USA. This built on the American-supported UN Security Council Resolution 1397,[15] which for the first time specifically endorsed a 'vision' of a Palestinian state alongside an Israeli one. In Bush's words, that vision is

> of a day when two states, Israel and Palestine, will live side by side in peace and security. I call upon all parties in the Middle East to abandon

> old hatreds and to meet their responsibilities for peace. The Palestinian state must be a reformed and peaceful and democratic state that abandons forever the use of terror. The government of Israel, as the terror threat is removed and security improves, must take concrete steps to support the emergence of a viable and credible Palestinian state, and to work as quickly as possible toward a final status agreement. As progress is made toward peace, settlement activity in the occupied territories must end.[16]

So, to what extent, post-9/11, are there new 'lines in the sand' with regard to the prospects for conflict and peace in the Middle East? Will Middle Eastern and Western (as well as other) governments need to reorder their priorities dramatically in the light of the war on terrorism? Lights still burn late in many capitals of Western Europe, the former Soviet Bloc, the Middle East and beyond looking at this question, and have done ever since September 2001. Our judgement is that the attacks of 9/11 have altered the balance of power in the Middle East, with the most immediate consequences being felt in Afghanistan, among radical Islamist elements, in the Palestinian–Israeli matrix and in Iraq. In the medium to long term, American re-engagement in the region, which has given preference to pre-emptive military (rather than diplomatic) power, has major implications for relations within the region as well as for other international actors. There is now much more emphasis on security issues, such as military training, sale of sophisticated defence equipment and the exchange of counter-terrorist intelligence with friendly countries. Arms sales, trading and militarization of the region are unlikely to decline. There may well be a realignment of the American military presence, but Iraq is unlikely now to be the route out of Saudi Arabia for US forces. Rather, the upper Gulf presents a more welcoming environment, but much still depends on any US confrontation with Iran. It is difficult to predict whether this will result in conflict prevention of a major order and/or the promotion of localized conflicts within states. However, it is safe to say that bilateral and multilateral involvement by Western governments in aid programmes aimed at alleviating poverty in the poorer Arab countries will not be substantially increased. And peace-building will be difficult to sustain if that is the case.

A major priority will be monitoring potential internal threats in those countries with close ties with the West, where there is known to be sympathy for al-Qaeda and some of whose nationals have been involved in the terrorist network. Saudi Arabia is probably the most worrying case. Despite the tight control that the House of Saud maintains over its citizens, there is a real threat from dissident elements with radical Islamist associations. Some of these will also reflect the schisms within Islam and the tensions that

Saudi promotion of Wahhabi fundamentalist ideology has created within the Muslim domain. For it is not only young Saudi radicals who are turning to Islam out of disgust with their regime's close ties with the West – especially the USA, with its support for Israel – and out of despair at the inability of regimes like their own effectively to help the Palestinians. Stories of corruption on a vast scale among the princely elite fuel similar emotions in a country where the economy is weak and unemployment is rising among a young workforce. There was some evidence that bomb outrages in 2003 and 2004 that were blamed on expatriates were in fact the work of home-grown elements seeking to destabilize the country, and the bland assurances of senior Saudis that all was well were not convincing. Since then, the Saudi authorities have had a number of successes against the home-grown militants, but there is still a failure to grasp the fact that the absence of adequate political and social rights generally, especially in the context of close official ties with the West, encourages support for radical dissident elements in a number of 'moderate' Arab countries. Poverty, abuse of human rights, striving for security at the expense of liberty and an absence of democratic or pluralistic institutions all create the conditions for political violence and terrorism, and thus conflict.

The problem is that there is considerable ambivalence throughout the Arab world over the question of political liberalization. Many political elites recognize the need to allow more popular participation, if only as a political safety valve, but others (especially those who appear to be calling the shots), perhaps mindful of what happened to the Soviet Union after Gorbachev, are concerned that liberalization or democracy will quickly undermine their authority and even oust them from power. Indeed, evidence of opposition from Islamist groups influenced by philosophies that are also embraced by Usama bin Laden may be used by some of these regimes as yet another pretext for resisting the democratic impulse expressed among their people. They may be genuinely anxious about the degree of fundamental opposition – from a variety of social forces and elements – to their rule and prefer repression to liberty. And it is not only in the Gulf countries that ruling authorities have ordered security crackdowns on the grounds of tackling terrorism: in less evidently autocratic regimes, like Jordan, Morocco and Egypt, threats, real and imaginary, have provided the pretext for new attacks on fundamental liberties.

Admittedly, in the Gulf some cautious steps permitting participation in state legislatures were taken in the wake of the Gulf War of 1990–1. Votes for women in Kuwait, albeit in a very limited franchise, were a case in point. This can be considered as a form of internally driven conflict prevention by the ruling elite. There is also awareness, in such circles, of the importance of economic reform to meet the rising expectations of expanding

populations. Yet support for economic liberalization and diversification away from total reliance on oil and gas and their derivatives has not proved a resounding economic or political success.[17] In 2002 there was recognition in reports from organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme and the World Economic Forum that the states of the Middle East risked further regional instability and conflict because of their failure to modernize. The natural resources of the region, including water, oil and gas, have not been effectively harnessed. Corruption, stagnating economies, poor levels of basic education and high population growth rates (in some cases they are the highest in the world) generate conditions that undermine the prospects for peace and prosperity for the citizens of this region. Economic greed motivated many past conflicts within the region, and they in turn were often linked to strategic considerations allied to external powers and actors. Additionally, there is scepticism that economic reform policies, which were advocated and promoted without much success throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, will work any better second time around.

After the occupation of Iraq, there is a perception in the region, rightly or wrongly, of the threat of further Western military intervention to enforce regime change. Heavy hinting about possible US-led action against Syria and Iran inevitably could be a serious destabilizing factor should it become a consistent *leitmotif* of US rhetoric. Indeed, recent moves by US military units, especially a naval build-up in the Gulf, have raised fears that the Americans are once again about to go beyond the rhetoric. And there will continue to be dissonance between Western-led global capitalism and resistance to it within much of the region. A UNDP report was forthright in its conclusions, arguing that the refusal of political and other leaders in the region to grant women more rights, open up the political process, improve education and crack down on widespread corruption left it incapable of pulling itself out of a two-decade slump.[18] Additionally, the geopolitics of the region, focused as they are on the negative recurrence of conflicts, have left little opportunity for policy-makers and bureaucrats to concentrate state resources and energies on growth, prosperity and peace. The example of Israel demonstrates this, for even with major economic assistance from the USA in the form of direct aid and loans, the Israeli economy has been driven into crisis as a result of conflict with its Palestinian neighbours, 9/11 and fear of instability in the region, depressing economic activity and discouraging foreign investment. A return to peace will promote economic recovery for Israel and help it regain global competitiveness. Regional peace will provide an even greater aid to recovery. Indeed, it is worth remembering that the peace dividend for Israel, in terms of inward investment and so on, from the Oslo accords were higher than for any Arab party, and this imbalance needs to be taken into account in the new equations for peace in

the region. Unfortunately, the asymmetry of power – political, economic or otherwise – militates against a lasting peace.

So, in the current highly charged atmosphere it will need a major effort by the international community to revive any peace process. The grievances of the Palestinians and how they are addressed will remain the touchstone of how the Arabs view the policies of the West. Following the inconclusive Israeli–Hizballah confrontation in 2006, Israeli politics are in a state of flux, with a government lacking credibility, popular support or an effective leadership. Meanwhile, the Palestinians have never been so divided. And recent policies of the Israeli government, plus the seeming inability of the international community to alleviate the poverty of many Palestinians, are not making it easy for the latter wholeheartedly to opt for peace.

A fair, just and comprehensive peace – tragically still a distant prospect – will do more than anything else to dissipate support for al-Qaeda and other extremist groups. Despite the ambitions of British Prime Minister Tony Blair to lead the march for peace as part of his 'legacy' before leaving Downing Street, or the agendas of France and Russia, it is only American leverage, pressure, military or diplomatic power that can put the Palestinian–Israeli peace process back on track. This is not, however, the same as applying such pressure in other areas of conflict in the region. American leverage did not work and is unlikely to work in the future in Lebanon or Algeria. Iraq has hardly been a conspicuous success, either. Nor, given its present circumstances, can it hope to answer the challenges arising from the wider manifestation of Islamist politics, including their extremist off-shoots. The path to peace, rather than to military pacification, throughout the region will have to be envisioned entirely differently.