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The International Reaction to the 1991 Uprising in Iraq

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the repercussions of the international reaction to the 1991 uprisings in Iraq. Although internally, the uprisings lacked an established leadership, reliable supplies, foodstuffs, and a cohesive unity among the regions, which contributed to their failure, the international community's reaction to the uprisings played an equally important part in crippling the internal insurrection against the Iraqi regime. The major and regional powers active in the region, including the United States, and bordering nations such as, Turkey, Syria, Iran and Saudi Arabia were presented with an opportunity to support a potential revolution and sway the turning tide of the uprising. However, despite their outwardly supportive rhetoric, not one actor was decisive enough, nor were any of the joint policies cohesive enough, to topple Saddam Hussein's regime. The most visibly active international organization, the United Nations, was also quick to criticize, but slow to act, generating criticism from other humanitarian organizations. Ultimately, this lack of quick and decisive action on the part of the major international and regional players had both directly and indirectly worked to the advantage of the Ba'ath regime and helped consolidate the suppression of the uprisings.

Introduction: The uprisings and its Aftermath

The repercussions of the first Gulf War on the totalitarian Iraqi Ba'ath regime and its leader Saddam Hussein were not only conducive to the regime's defeat and withdrawal from the state of Kuwait, but also induced serious internal discontent:

Within a few days following the coalition war, the uprising in the Southern part of the country quickly spread to the Kurdish area in the

north. The “popular uprising”, as it was described, began on March 2nd... Similar events occurred in Basra, angry and disgruntled infantry soldiers who had returned to the city, bringing with them tales of their devastating defeat and humiliation, launched attacks against Ba’ath party offices... Hardly had the uprising begun in Nasiriya and Basra than it spread to a number of other southern towns including the Shi’i holy cities of Karbala and Najaf.¹

In retrospect, the catalysts of the 1991 revolts are easy to identify. The Iraqi people faced two consecutive wars within the span of a decade. The first was the eight year long, agonizing war with Iran, which ended in 1988, and resulted in a stalemate but was declared by the regime as a pseudo victory for the state of Iraq.² The second was the more recent, humiliating defeat and withdrawal from the First Gulf War, following Operation Desert Storm in 1991.³ The harsh conditions the Iraqi troops had endured during these two wars weakened their endurance and hardened their resentment towards the regime.⁴ Lastly, upon their return home from the state Kuwait, the troops were not only forced to face the humiliation of defeat, but also the lingering effects of

¹ Majid Khadduri and Edmund Ghareeb, *War in the Gulf, 1990-91: the Iraq-Kuwait Conflict and its Implications* (London: Oxford University Press, 1997), 190-191.

² See Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2004), 212. According to Marr, throughout the eight year span, the Iran-Iraq war caused in excess of 380 thousand Iraqi lives.

³ See James Blackwell, *Thunder in the Desert: the Strategy and Tactics of the Persian Gulf War* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1991), 29.

During operation Desert Storm, Military affairs analyst James Blackwell argues that the constant “aerial, artillery, and naval gunfire pounding” during the first Gulf war broke the will to fight for more than half of the Iraqis forces. As a result, Iraqi troops, in large numbers, had surrendered, as they “had been severely demoralized by intensive bombing.”

⁴ Alberto Bin, *Desert Storm: a Forgotten War* (Westport, Conn: Praeger 1998), 147. According to Bin, during the Gulf War there was a significant imbalance between the harsh living conditions of the Iraqi troops and that of the Coalition troops. It was reported that Iraqi ground troops, stranded in the trenches during the cold winters of the desert, had only received between .25 to .75 liters of water per day and also, did not receive food on a daily basis.

malnutrition, magnified by the stifling U.N. Sanctions at home.⁵

The early sparks of the revolt were ignited in the town of Zubair, led by angry, returned soldiers determined to end Saddam's regime.⁶ Angry civilians, who were equally embittered by the failings of the regime, were eager to join the soldiers and take up arms.⁷ Revolts soon followed in the towns of Abu'l Khassib and Basra, and quickly spread throughout the rest of the country, stretching from north to south.⁸

Unfortunately, the uprisings were not destined for the anticipated happy ending manifested in a victory of the people. Not only did the uprisings fail, but also the repercussion of its failure came at the highest human cost. Despite the geographical breadth of the uprisings, stretching from the Kurdish north to the Shi'i cities in the south, Saddam won back cities with brutal force. Even the United Nations Security Council resolution meant to protect the insurrectionists, Resolution 688 passed on April 5, had no effect on the outcome. According to Human Rights Watch:

In their attempts to retake cities, and after consolidating control, loyalists forces killed thousands of unarmed civilians by firings indiscreetly into residential areas; executing young people on the streets, in homes and in hospitals; rounding up suspects especially young men, during the house to house searches, and arresting them without charge or shooting them en masse; and using helicopters to attack unarmed civilians as they fled the cities.⁹

⁵ Alberto Bin, 59.

Upon the return of the Iraqi defeated soldiers, the monthly quota of 1.5 Kg of wheat per person declared at the beginning of the embargo in 1990, was even reduced to one kilogram per person.

⁶ Abd al-Jabbar Faleh, "Why the Uprisings Failed" *Middle East Report*, No. 176, Iraq in the Aftermath (1992), 9.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁹ Eric Goldstein, "Endless Torment: the 1991 Uprising in Iraq and its Aftermath" n.p.: Middle East Watch (1992): Summary.

The uprisings within their geo-political context required a reaction from the international community. However, the international community's disunion and its lack of swift action only worked to the advantage of the Ba'ath regime, thus, permitting it to suppress both the Kurdish and the Shi'i opposition.

The U.S. Reaction

In examining recent variations of U.S. doctrine on foreign intervention adopted in the Middle East and beyond, Amin Saikal wrote:

While the Eisenhower Doctrine reinforced containment by opposing radical nationalism as a manifestation of "international communism": the Nixon Doctrine took a somewhat different approach, Broadly speaking, Nixon's policy sought to avoid a repetition of the humiliating U.S. experience in Vietnam by using regional surrogates instead of direct intervention to further U.S. interests.¹⁰

It is obvious that in the context of the 1991 uprisings, U.S. President George H.W. Bush had not adopted the Nixon nor the Eisenhower doctrine. Instead, in this context, he forged his own brand of foreign policy that seemed to favor rhetoric over direct or indirect intervention. Despite how involved both politically and militarily the United States had been in the region during the Gulf War, United States was slow to act when the uprisings broke out in Iraq in 1991. The U.S. did not involve its "regional surrogates" nor provide arms or foodstuffs to the Kurdish and Shi'i rebels in the south and north to help them topple the regime of Saddam Hussein.¹¹

¹⁰ Amin Saikal, "The United States and Persian Gulf Security" *World Policy Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (1992): 516.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 516.

In his speech on February 2, 1991, President George H.W. Bush declared that the “Iraqis’ need to take matters into their own hands and force their dictatorial leader to step aside.”¹² Exactly one month later, on March 2, 1991, the uprisings broke out. However, the Iraqis, despite their efforts, lacked a cohesive unity, and could not, in Bush’s words, “force their dictatorial leader to step aside.”¹³

After hearing Bush’s speech, Iraqis walked away with two opposing impressions. Some Iraqi rebels arguably thought that they would receive financial and military support from the United States, which boosted their morals, and motivated their continued fight. However, financial and military support was never materialized. On the other hand, Roland Danreuther argued that, in his speech, President Bush made an error by not stressing the fact that if the people of Iraq topple the dictator, the U.S. would support building a democratic state that would respect Iraq’s ethnic diversities, specifically its minorities.¹⁴ In analyzing the rhetoric of his speech, other groups in Iraq suspected the U.S. President of having a hidden political agenda. The minority groups in particular feared that the U.S. might place another dictatorial figure from the Sunni community, and thereby impose a new form of unity through brutality. This fear stemmed from analogous situations in Syria and Saudi Arabia, both of which benefited from U.S. support of their dictatorial Sunni leaders. With that said, had the president of the United States been more direct about promising a democratic future for Iraq, the rural population, especially the minorities, would have participated in the uprisings, rather than, according to Toby Dodge, opting not to participate and thus, remaining

¹² Quoted in Roland Dannreuther, *The Gulf Conflict: A Political and Strategic Analysis* (London: Brassey’s for the International Institute for Strategic Studies 1992), 63.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

passive out of fear until it was clear who would prevail, the rebels or Saddam's regime.¹⁵ Dodge went on to argue that the passivity of the rural areas in the uprisings was one of the main reasons of the uprisings downfall.¹⁶ A more affirmative political and military stance would have had the effect of tipping the balance of the uprisings.

Dannreuther argued that during the uprisings, high-level Iraqi commanders from inside the regime were waiting for a go ahead from the coalition to join forces with the rebels so they could tip the balance of power and topple Saddam's rule from within the Ba'ath party. However, given that the U.S. reaction was no more than soft rhetoric concerning the events, these generals were hesitant to react and, instead, weighed the colossal risks that might erupt if the uprisings were to fail.¹⁷ Indeed, by early April, 1991, the social and ethnic outcome of crushing the uprisings was colossal; one million Kurdish refugees flocked to Iran and half a million to Turkey in order to escape the regime's reign of terror.¹⁸

When the Gulf War came to an end with the Iraq defeat, George H.W. Bush implicitly stated in his speeches that the U.S.' objective was to help overthrow Saddam Hussein.¹⁹ Paradoxically, French Ambassador to Turkey at the time, Eric Rouleau argued that many Arabs and Iraqi Ba'athists, including members of the opposition, believed that the United States passive reaction to the uprisings came about for the reason that the super power never intended to remove Saddam Hussein until they found a suitable replacement. This would explain why Bush, in his February speech, did not

¹⁵ Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied* (New York, N Y: Columbia University Press, 2003), 162.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 162.

¹⁷ Roland Dannreuther, 63.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁹ Eric Rouleau, "America's Unyielding Policy toward Iraq." *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 74, No. 1 (1995): 68.

propose a democratic post-war future for Iraq, but only a toppling of the dictator and his regime.

The First Gulf War ended with the defeat of the Iraqi army, and was immediately followed by ceasefire talks at Safwan on March 3, 1991, coincidentally one day after the uprisings had spread throughout Iraq. The Safwan ceasefire talks were organized by General Norman Schwarzkopf, Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. Central Command and commander of the Coalition Forces in the Gulf War, along with other senior coalition commanders. They met with Iraqi delegates sent by Saddam and were tasked with negotiating the ceasefire terms. Given that fixed wing aircrafts were banned from flying over Iraq, the Iraqi commanders asked the Coalition whether non-fixed wing aircraft could hover over Iraq. General Schwarzkopf agreed.²⁰ Alistair Finlan argues that the Iraqis took advantage of this loophole in the flight ban over Iraq, and proceeded to use non-fixed wing aircraft equipped with machine guns to suppress and crush the uprisings. The author argues that this was a shrewd and purposeful act by the Iraqi commanders during the Safwan peace talks.²¹ To follow this line of thought, Schwarzkopf, backed by the U.S. administration, had inadvertently permitted the Iraqi regime to use and fly helicopters equipped with gunships that were then used during the uprisings. Lester H. Brune argues that instantly after the Safwan talks, the Iraqi Republican Guard brutally attacked Basra, the Shi'i rebel stronghold, using the same helicopters that were inadvertently permitted by General Schwarzkopf. Nevertheless, during the attacks, President Bush ordered the American forces occupying southern Iraq

²⁰ Alastair Finlan,82.

²¹ Ibid., 84.

at the time “not to engage the Republican Guard.”²² According to Phebe Marr, this had convinced many Iraqis that the United States was supportive of the regime and not the rebels, mainly out of fear of Shi’i sectarianism, and most importantly, fanaticism.²³

Dialogue, a British quarterly journal published by the Iraqi Shi’i Al-Khoei Foundation, published an article about the U.S.’s passive-aggressive reaction to the uprisings. The article pointed out that all the military and diplomatic efforts by the U.S. were designed to cut Saddam’s military arm outside of Iraq, however, there was no strategy in place to free the Iraqi people from the atrocities of the Ba’ath regime.²⁴ According to the quarterly, one peculiar and passive reaction by the United States to the uprisings was the filming by air of Saddam’s attempts to dry the marshes in southern Iraq. According to the article, “ ‘Despite the no-fly zone, the drying of the marshes in southern Iraq (intended to crush the Shiah dissident population) was closely filmed by U.S. planes for more than a year without any attempt to halt it.’ ”²⁵ This bolsters the former French ambassador Eric Rouleau’s argument that the behavior of the U.S. was paradoxical; while Bush was giving speeches about Iraqis taking actions in their own hands, less than a month later, the U.S. war machine had been passively watching and filming by air, Saddam Hussein, this time, taking matters in his own hands by savagely massacring the rebels.²⁶ The filming by air culminated in a report by US officials that two holy shrines in Karbala had been severely damaged between March 11 and 17. However, throughout the uprisings, on the military level, the U.S. Government only

²² Lester H. Brune, *America and the Iraqi Crisis, 1990-1992: Origins and Aftermath* (Claremont, CA: Regina Books, 1993), 126 -127.

²³ Phebe Marr, 252.

²⁴ Quoted in Eric Rouleau, 69.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

interfered once on the grounds, when U.S. air fighters shot down two Iraqi “fixed wing fighters” en route to bomb Kirkuk, as in violation of the No Fly Zone of March 1991.²⁷

Another interesting reaction of the United States was on March 9, 1991 when U.S. government officials warned Iraqi President Saddam Hussein that if chemical weapons were to be used to suppress the uprisings, like in 1988 during the Anfal campaign, then the U.S. Military would react and launch air strikes. Surprisingly, the death toll of the chemical attacks of the Anfal campaign was far less than that of the 1991 uprisings. According to Phebe Marr, “at least 50,000 and possibly as many as 100,000 were killed in the Anfal campaign.²⁸ The death toll of the 1991 uprisings by May 1st reached 30,000 in the southern areas alone. In the north, two million displaced Kurds fled to the borders of Iran and Turkey and the death toll reached 500 to 1,000 victims every day of the flight.²⁹ For this reason, statistically, the balance should have weighed for greater military and diplomatic support in the 1991 uprisings than in the Anfal campaign. The former was contributing to much higher death tolls and the displacement of nearly half of the Kurdish population, irrespective of the Iraqi government’s use of CW (chemical weapons) to put down the uprisings. However, it was also cited by some Iraqi sources that government troops did use helicopters to drop a variety of chemical like weapons, such as Napalm, phosphorous bombs and sulfuric acid.³⁰

All told, the shift from a hot to cold doctrine after the First Gulf War by President George H.W. Bush indicated that the U.S. wanted to keep the Iraqi regime in power. According to a statement by the U.S. National Security Aid, “Our policy is to get rid of

²⁷ Lester H. Brune, 128.

²⁸ Phebe Marr, 202.

²⁹ Ibid., 253.

³⁰ Eric Goldstein, Introduction.

Saddam Hussein himself and not his regime.”³¹ There are three reasons most often cited. The first is the belief that a paralyzed and weak regime was more suitable to U.S. interests in the region than any other stronger alternative.³² A suitable adage is “the devil we know is better than the devil we don’t know.” Second, Iran’s proximity and overt interest in the developments in Iraq posed a threat to U.S. interests. Third, Bush, like Nixon, wanted to avoid another Vietnam.

The diplomatic and military decisions that were made by the United States left their repercussions and arguably contributed to the failure of the 1991 *intifada*. David Baran argued that, throughout the 1990’s, the United States had punished the Iraqi nation state twice. The first was by imposing embargo. The second was by leaving Saddam Hussein in power by allowing him to brutally crush the 1991 *intifada*.³³

The Iranian Reaction

The Iran-Iraq War officially ended in August of 1988, but tensions persisted between the two countries over cease-fire implementations and over the catalyst of the eight-year long war, the Shatt al-Arab.³⁴ Nevertheless, Iraqi-Iranian relations were moving towards a quasi reconciliation as a result of numerous meetings between Iraqi and Iranian

³¹ Majid Khadduri and Edmund Ghareeb, 204.

³² Amin Saikal, 520.

On a related note, before the start of operation Desert Storm, General Schwarzkopf publicly announced that other alternatives to destroying the Iraqi regime needs to be found.

Quoted in Allan E. Goodman and Sandra Clemens Bogart, *Diplomacy During the Persian Gulf War* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, 1992), 5.

³³ David Baran, *Vivre la Tyrannie et lui Survivre: l'Irak en Transition* (Paris: Mille et Une Nuits, 2004), 10.

³⁴ Martin Staniland, *Getting to No: the Diplomacy of the Gulf Conflict*, August 2, 1990- January 15, 1991 (Washington, DC: Distributed by the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, 1993), case #449 Part 2 pp 2.

foreign ministers.³⁵ However, when the uprisings broke out in the southern Shi'i part of the country, the initial Iranian reaction favored the side of the rebels. Diplomatically, this sparked the release of a set of official reactions from the Iran government, including the following:

- 1) March 08, 1991, Iranian President Rafsanjani called for the resignation of the Iraqi President, Saddam Hussein, but denied Iran was aiding the uprisings.³⁶
- 2) March 13, 1991, Ali Hoseyni Khamene'i urged the Iraqi army not to fire on fellow Muslims and called for an Islamic state in Iraq.³⁷
- 3) March 31, 1991, the Iranian Islamic Revolution Council criticized the U.S. government for giving false hope to the Iraqi people and encouraging them to overthrow Saddam, while simultaneously acting in favor of the Iraqi regime.
- 4) March 31, 1991, Iran called for the "international efforts to stop the massacre of the Iraqi people."³⁸

Qāsim Buraysam, who documented and witnessed the uprisings as both an active rebel and detainee during its aftermath, argued that Iran, in its overt interest in the uprisings, prompted the international community to redirect their attention to other possible consequences of a successful rebellion, such as the emergence of another Islamic state closely aligned with Iran.³⁹ As a result, Iran was either directly or indirectly, the catalyst to the failure of the uprisings.

³⁵ Martin Staniland, case #449 Part 2 pp 2.

³⁶ Patricia Lee Dorff, "Chronology 1991" *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 71, No. 1, America and the World (1991/1992): 189.

³⁷ Majid Khadduri and Edmund Ghareeb, 194.

³⁸ Joseph S. Nye and Roger K. Smith., eds. *After the Storm: Lessons from the Gulf War* (Queenstown, Md: Aspen Strategy Group, 1992), 347.

³⁹ Qāsim Buraysam, *al-Sharārah wa-al-Ramād: Shahādah Hayyah 'an Intifādat al-Sha'b al-'Irāqī wa-'Adhāb al-Muntafidīn fī Sujūn al-Radwānīyah* (Bayrūt, Lubnān: Dār al-Kunūz al-Adabīyah, 2004), 168.

According to Buraysam, the Iranian media's overt support of the uprisings, manifested through Islamic slogans, alluded to the international community that the catalyst to the uprisings stemmed from a fundamental Islamic and Shi'i doctrine. Buraysam pointed out that Mouhammad Baqir al-Hakim, leader of the Iraqi Islamic opposition based in Iran, used the uprising to his advantage by falsely implying its roots laid in Islamic fundamentalist doctrines. He purposefully hijacked the unplanned and spontaneous uprisings only to serve his own motives by falsely inserting religious overtones and making them seem in-line with his own Islamic fundamentalist doctrines.⁴⁰ For this reason, Buraysam believes that the manner in which the Iranians interfered had inadvertently solidified an international preference for the existing Iraqi regime over the rebel cause, despite objections to the Ba'ath party.

Saddam recognized the international fears and distrust towards religiously motivated rebellion, such as the theocratic Shi'i overthrow of the monarchy in Iran. He cunningly used the overt Iranian rhetorical support of the uprisings to suggest to the world that if the rebels were to take over, another Shi'i Islamic state would take precedence over any attempt to establish a democracy in Iraq. For example, in a speech given on March 16, 1991, Saddam directly accused the Islamic Republic of Iran of being the catalyst to the southern rebellion in Iraq.⁴¹ Saddam was alluding to the world that were the uprisings to succeed, Iraq's future would be bleak and dark, comparable to that of Iran.

Following Saddam's speech, the Iranian Ayatollah Seyed Ali Hoseyni Khamene'i declared that Islam is the only way for the Iraqi people to overcome the miseries and

⁴⁰ Qāsīm Buraysam, 171.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 171.

sufferings bestowed upon them by the regime.⁴² However, according to Buraysam, Iran had neither financially nor militarily supported the uprisings; nonetheless, Iran continued to publically vocalize its support.⁴³ Moreover, bolstering Buraysam's argument, Lester H. Brune claimed that Iraqi Shi'a were, at some point during the uprisings, expecting arms, ammunitions and foodstuff from Iran, but these never came.⁴⁴ The Shi'i rebels did obtain some of their arms and ammunition from Iran, but none were deliberately offered to them by Iran. Instead, they were all smuggled through the border.⁴⁵ Charles Tripp similarly argued that the uprisings were by "no means associated to any Islamic groups."⁴⁶

According to Brune, the Iranian *Mujtahid* distrusted Iraqi Shi'a too much to risk sending Iranian soldiers to begin another *jihad* against Saddam."⁴⁷ Muhsin Rada'i, the commander of the Revolutionary Islamic Guard, had ordered Mouhammad Baqir al-Hakim not to engage in military action along the Iranian Iraqi border.⁴⁸

All told, this overt *rhetorical* Iranian support had prompted the international community, specifically, the U.S. government and Saudi Arabia, to decide against helping the uprisings, specifically the Shi'i components, out of fear of the spread of Islamic fundamentalism in the region. An examination of the Saudi Arabian reaction will be essential to track the repercussions of the Iranian stance to the uprisings on the policies of the kingdom.

⁴² Qāsīm Buraysam, 172.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁴⁴ Lester H. Brune, 126.

⁴⁵ Nasser Rashid and Esber Shaheen, *Saudi Arabia and the Gulf War* (Joplin, Mo., U.S.A: International Institute of Technology, 1992), 419.

⁴⁶ Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 246.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁴⁸ Qāsīm Buraysam, 173.

The Saudi Arabian Reaction

Lester H. Brune argued that two international reactions led to the quick destruction of the uprisings: first was President Bush ordering the American troops, occupying southern Iraq at the time, not to interfere in the dispute between the Republican Guard and the Shi'a in the area, and, second was Saudi Arabia's refusal to help Shi'i Muslims gain back control of southern Iraq.⁴⁹ The Saudi commander of Desert Storm, Prince Khalid bin Sultan confirmed Saudi Arabia's stance towards the conflict when he said: "The rebellion against Hussein [is] an internal matter and the business of the Iraqi people."⁵⁰

However, despite their unwillingness to involve themselves directly in the conflict, the Saudis were concerned about a potential overthrow of Saddam by Shi'i forces and felt threatened by the potential emergence of another Shi'i state in the region. Therefore, Saudi Arabia became surreptitiously involved in the Iraqi political opposition movement based outside of Iraq. When the uprisings broke out, the Saudis' remained in the background, orchestrating the exiled Iraqi opposition gathering in March of 1991 in Beirut, Lebanon, where the first National Iraqi Opposition Congress was held.⁵¹

Interestingly enough, according to Cockburn, Prince Turki bin Faisal bin Abdul Aziz, head of the Saudi intelligence and expert on Iraqi affairs at the time, decided to delegate the Syrians to act on behalf of Saudi interests and put them in direct contact with the

⁴⁹ Lester H. Brune, 127.

⁵⁰ Majid Khadduri and Edmund Ghareeb, 205.

⁵¹ Andrew and Patrick Cockburn, *Out of the Ashes: the Resurrection of Saddam Hussein* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1999), 48.

Iraqi opposition.⁵² Turki believed that the Syrians had better connections and, more importantly, a better understanding of the mindset and undertone of the Iraqi opposition.⁵³ It is also likely that the Saudis bestowed the task upon Syria in order to conceal their involvement in promoting any potential successive government in the event the uprisings succeeded. Yet, they wanted to remain an influential actor in the event the uprisings were successful, and therefore, placed their financial support in a potential future government that would be more in line with the Saudi Sunni doctrine. The Iraqi Opposition Congress seemed a far more favorable option than a fundamentalist Shi'i-led government.

Turki presented 27 million dollars to his Syrian counterpart as funds meant to support the Iraqi Congress in its preliminary stages of preparing for a new provisional government that would replace Saddam once the rebel groups toppled the regime.⁵⁴ However, according to Cockburn, the Syrians took the money but concluded that the sum was too large to be spent on only the opposing Iraqi dissidents, and thus pocketed a large sum for themselves.⁵⁵ Meanwhile, the Congress, while succeeding in bringing together the Iraqi opposition in one place, failed because the Iraqi dissidents had too many ideological differences among them.⁵⁶ The Congress, the largest gathering in the history of the Iraqi opposition, met only days after the uprisings began. It was presented with the remainder of the Saudi funds from Syria, which it then failed to appropriately

⁵² Andrew and Patrick Cockburn, 48.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

allocate to the uprisings. Thus, the 27 million dollars ended up in either Syrian pockets or was distributed among Iraqi dissidents, thus never reaching the uprisings.⁵⁷

In conclusion, had the money been directly allocated to the rebels to buy arms, foodstuffs and ammunition, perhaps their chance of keeping momentum and reaching victory may have been materialized. On the other hand, the Saudi intelligence along with the religiously imbued Sunni kingdom had probably chosen to contribute in this way as an indication of their non-support of a Shi'i-led uprisings in the south of Iraq.

The Syrian Reaction

In late December 1990, the Syrian regime expressed their support for the Iraqi opposition in exile by sponsoring and organizing a meeting of local and visiting Iraqi opposition members “who emerged with a program that called for the overthrow of Saddam.”⁵⁸ However, only a few months later, when the uprisings broke out, all such meetings came to a halt, and Syria, instead, began to redirect its attention and efforts on a collective response from all Arab countries as to the aftermath of the Gulf War. On March 6, 1991, a week after the uprisings broke out, and 3 days after the Iraqi commanders officially surrendered and complied with the ceasefire treaties in Safwan, Syria with Egypt and the six GCC (countries of Gulf Cooperation Council) called an *urgent* joint meeting in the Syrian capital of Damascus. This resulted in the issuance of the “Damascus Declaration.”⁵⁹ The Declaration completely overshadowed the uprisings

⁵⁷ Andrew and Patrick Cockburn, 48.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵⁹ The Middle East Journal, “Chronology January 16, 1991-April 15, 1991.” Middle East Journal, Vol. 45, No. 3 (1991): 489.

in Iraq, and instead, redirected focus to the protection of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia's borders against future attacks from Iraq.⁶⁰ As part of the agreement, the "Damascus Declaration" committee established a regional Arab security force.⁶¹ Paradoxically, the Desert Storm mission had already ended and the Iraqi army had already withdrawn from Kuwait. This said, the Safwan cease-fire agreement rendered the Declaration as inoperative given that the Damascus Declaration took place after the ceasefire talks at Safwan. This was perhaps indicative of the regional powers trying to find ways to bypass direct involvement in the uprisings.⁶² Or, as Strauss argued, the Syrian regime preferred a weak, distrustful and hand clipped Ba'ath regime rather than a U.S. backed regime sharing its border.⁶³

Another hypothesis that would explain Syria's sudden lack of interest in Iraqi internal affairs posits that despite the overt distrust of Saddam Hussein, nevertheless, the Ba'athist totalitarian regime in Syria worried that a successful populist uprising in Iraq might spread to Syria. If Saddam Hussein's regime was to be toppled, the Iraqi uprisings might forge a democratic Iraq, and thus, encourage Syrians to similarly revolt against their own totalitarian regime. For that reason, any Syrian support of the uprisings would be detrimental to the Syrian regime.

⁶⁰ The Middle East Journal, 489.

⁶¹ "Syrian Arab Republic" Altapedia Online, accessed April 21, 2010, <http://www.atlapedia.com/online/countries/syria.htm>

⁶² The Middle East Journal, 489.

⁶³ Mark Strauss, "Attacking Iraq" *Foreign Policy*, No. 129 (2002):18.

The Turkish Reaction

As the uprisings reached momentum and city after city fell to the rebels, Turkey found itself more deeply involved in Iraqi affairs. The catalysts that propelled this extensive involvement were fourfold:

- 1) The potential emergence of a Kurdish state with rich resources and its wealthy capital of Kirkuk
- 2) The fate of the Turkish speaking Turkomen in Iraq
- 3) The effects on the Kurdish movement in Turkey
- 4) The potential emergence of a hostile and fundamentally Islamic state of Iraq⁶⁴

publically, Turkey was supportive of the uprisings. Turkish President at the time, Turgut Özal, urged President George H. W. Bush to support the Kurdish uprisings to overthrow Saddam's regime.⁶⁵ In addition, according to Mahmut Bali Aykan, the Turkish government opened direct lines of communication with key figures from the Kurdish opposition in 1991. For example, when the uprisings broke out, leader of the Kurdish PUK rebellious faction, Jalal Talbani, and a representative of Kurdish KDP faction, Massud Barzani, were secretly invited to Ankara.⁶⁶ Aykan argued that this invitation by the Turkish government indicated an overt change in the country's policy towards the Kurdish north in Iraq.⁶⁷ Historically opposed to a Kurdish stronghold in northern Iraq because of the potential of secession of its own Kurdish population in the south, Turkey seemed to switch gears with its expressed support for the Kurds in the

⁶⁴ Henri J. Barkey, "Turkey and Iraq: The Perils of (and Prospect) of Proximity." *United States Institute of Peace*, Special Report 141 (2005):2 -3.

⁶⁵ Mahmut Bali Aykan, "Turkey's Policies in Northern Iraq." *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 32, No 4 (1996): 345.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 347.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 347.

uprisings. However, according to Aykan, this invitation was not an offer of any military or diplomatic assistance.⁶⁸ Instead, the Turks had three main objectives: “obtain first-hand information about the developments in Iraq, to exert some influence over the developments there through inducements to the Kurds not to attempt to establish an independent Kurdish state, and to isolate the PKK [the Kurdistan Workers Party in Turkey] from other Kurdish groups with the aim of neutralizing its operations from its bases in northern Iraq.”⁶⁹

Any direct financial and military involvement would present three pivotal risks, posing a threat to the Turkish state as a whole. First, if President Özal and the Turkish statesmen directly helped the Kurds overthrow Saddam, then this disintegration of the Ba’ath regime might forge wide spread regional uprisings extending into Turkey. Second, the Turkish intelligence could not be certain that a successor to Saddam would not perpetuate or carry over the same foreign policy.⁷⁰ If such were the case, there would be no advantage for Turkey to involve itself in the overthrow of Saddam’s government. Third, the future of 2.5 million independent Turkomen would be at stake if the Kurds were to establish their own state. Clustered close to the Turkish border, the Turkomen might try to turn to Turkey for protection from fear of forced annexation or assimilation into the Kurdish state in the midst of this political turmoil. This said, safeguarding the independent Turkomen would be costly for the Turkish state on both the economic and political level.⁷¹ Ultimately, the Turks wanted to prevent the establishment of a Kurdish state in any way possible.

⁶⁸ Mahmut Bali Aykan, 347.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 347.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 353.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 352.

In an attempt to quell any Kurdish or Turkomen resistance at home, President Özal also proceeded to lift the ban on the Kurdish language in Turkey.⁷² Despite that this had created political internal dissent in Turkey, Özal might have believed that better to deal with internal dissent than deal with the risk of an emerging Kurdish state by its borders.

The United Nation Reaction

Through some 30 U.N. Resolutions and numerous other declarations and rulings, Iraq was put in a straightjacket: a multifaceted embargo, an air and naval blockade, two “no-fly” zones inside the country to protect (rather late, admittedly) the Kurds and Shiites after Iraqi forces put down their respective uprisings in March 1991...⁷³

Despite how numerous, this handful of resolutions had neither protected the Kurds, nor the Shi'a from prosecution, displacement and oppression. The Iraqi opposition hoped that these resolutions would weaken the Ba'ath regime from within, making it even more vulnerable to defeat. However, these hopes were never met simply because the resolutions came too late.

For example, on March 18, Sami Abd al-Rahman, a high-ranking, key figure in the rebel movement in the Kurdish region of Iraq, “issued an urgent international appeal for food, aid, and medicine on behalf of the entire opposition in Iraq.”⁷⁴ However, it was not until April 5, the day the uprisings had ended, after already two million Kurdish had

⁷² Mahmut Bali Aykan, 347.

⁷³ Eric Rouleau, 62.

⁷⁴ The Middle East Journal, “Chronology January 16, 1991-April 15, 1991.” Middle East Journal, Vol. 45, No. 3 (1991): 491.

been displaced, that the United Nations Council met and “voted to condemn Iraq’s oppression of the Kurds and other dissidents...”⁷⁵

On April 9th, the Security Council adopted Resolution 688, which condemned the Iraqi governments’ oppression of its people and insisted Iraq allow international humanitarian organizations to enter the country. 12,000 United Nations soldiers were assigned to the area in order to survey a safety zone to protect the Kurds. In addition, France, the United Kingdom and the United States instated a second No Fly-Zone (NFZ), however, this time, the NFZ included non-fixed winged aircrafts, i.e., helicopters equipped with machine guns.⁷⁶

However, according to a report on the evaluation of “United Nations Coordination of the International Response to the Gulf Crisis,” Resolution 688 came late as a response to the uprisings, and “set up an ongoing tension between the Security Council and the UN’s humanitarian machinery.”⁷⁷ In addition, according to Middle East Watch, Resolution 688 was born problematic, given that there were also displaced non-Kurdish ethnic groups, who were scattered throughout the Iraqi borders, and who were completely ignored.⁷⁸

In the aftermath of the uprisings, the Middle East Watch called on the international community, including the major powers involved in the conflict and the United Nations Council, to reinforce demands on the state of Iraq and submitted the following to the international community:

⁷⁵ Lester H. Brune, 129.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 129

⁷⁷ Larry Minear, et al, *United Nations Coordination of the International Humanitarian Response to the Gulf Crisis 1990-1992* (Providence, RI: Brown University, The Thomas J. Watson Jr Institute for International Studies, 1992): 15.

⁷⁸ Eric Goldstein, Summary.

- 1) Iraq should provide the international community the legal status of every person taken into custody during the uprisings
- 2) The regime should release the detainees arrested during the uprisings
- 3) Iraq should publicize the names of all persons killed during the uprisings⁷⁹

In a special report, Middle East Watch urged the U.N. agencies, stationed in Iraq following the adoption of Resolution 668, to quickly develop alternative means to protect displaced non-Kurdish populations.⁸⁰ This indicates that the strategies implemented by the participating agencies were perhaps ineffective, and alternative approaches were necessary.

Despite the high death toll and level of displacement that the uprisings had forged, Resolution 688 did not take the same definitive tone or present the same harsh consequences as Resolution 661, which, less than a year earlier, implemented sanctions on Iraq during its invasion of Kuwait. At no point was there a resolution passed which extended to the uprisings rebels the “inherent right of individual or collective self-defense,” a right that was explicitly granted during the “armed attack by Iraq against Kuwait.”⁸¹

By February 1992, almost a year after the brutal events of the uprisings, Edward Acheson, a regional scholar, declared that the U.N. resolutions, which were designed to “protect the Kurds and other minorities after the uprisings, are far from being achieved, in addition, the repressive regime of Saddam remains.”⁸²

⁷⁹ Eric Goldstein, Summary.

⁸⁰ Ibid., Summary.

⁸¹ Earl F. Gibbons, *Forging Consensus: the Western Alliance and the Invasion of Kuwait* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, 1992), 4.

⁸² Edward D. Acheson, “Health Problems In Iraq: While Waiting For A Political Solution Iraq Needs Humanitarian Aid” *BMJ: British Medical Journal*, Vol. 304, No. 6825 (Feb. 22, 1992): 455.

Conclusion

Setting aside the internal factors, the reaction of the bordering countries, in particular, Iran, and the active international power, the United States, to the 1991 uprisings in Iraq had a significant impact on their failure. Each country's interference, or lack thereof, in the course of events, directly impacted the uprisings and led to their pitiful end. Even the *rhetorical* reaction of the international and regional can be labeled a quasi-intervention given that it also had an impact. With that said, in examining the nature of foreign interference, it can be summed up in the following manner:

States evaluate the expected utility from intervention and the possible losses they could suffer. States also assess the situation – not through weighing hypothetical benefits or costs but in accordance with the norms, rules, morality and ideational settings they are themselves governed by.⁸³

In the context of the 1991 uprisings, two countries' reactions weighed a particularly heavy influence: one is Iran, and the second is the United States. For the former, these self-reflective hypothetical benefits had to be in line with a revolutionary theocratic and Islamic doctrine. This doctrine dictated Iran's nature of interference in the uprisings. Conversely, for the United States, the nature of the interference had to be in line with the nation's ideologically Western mindset, that is, Neo-Christian conservatism. This, in turn, also dictated the nature of the U.S. interference. For that reason, the international and regional reaction, regardless of its nature, forged an antipodal interference with the uprisings. This had rendered the nature of the U.S. interference incongruous with that

⁸³ Robert Nalbandov, *Foreign Interventions in Ethnic Conflicts* (London: Ashgate, 2009), Conclusion.

of the Iranian. This incongruity had stalled the outcome of the U.S. interference and was rendered as ineffective.

For example, perhaps the U.S. witnessing a small number of Shi'i rebels wearing a green headbands (the green color is the symbol of Islam), or, Bakr al-hakim calling the uprisings Islamic in its nature, had prompted the U.S. Government to react either negatively, or only rhetorically, without transforming this rhetoric into action.⁸⁴ For example, if Iran interfered and thus imposing its doctrine, this would prompt the U.S. to back up, in spite of the fact, that, as Buraysam argued, the uprisings were led by the people, and the rebels holding Shi'i slogans were in the minority.⁸⁵ The Iraqi uprisings were dissolved and disintegrated within the binary opposition of the antipodal nature of the international and regional interference.

Internally, the inner contradictions of the Iraqi uprisings that opposing powers had inferred further bolstered the incongruous nature of the international and regional interference. For that reason, Faleh argued, "by dint of their inner contractions and peculiarities the Iraqi uprisings were deprived of any significant international and regional support, apart from the unhelpful one-sided Iranian backing."⁸⁶ The Iranians backed only the southern factions of the uprisings, that is, the Shi'i region. The U.N. Resolution 688 called for the protection of the Kurds in the north, but did not mention the Shi'is. With that said, had the uprisings been unipolar, of only a Kurdish or a Shi'i nature, perhaps the interferences would not have been as incongruous, or antipodal.

⁸⁴ Nasser Rashid and Esber Shaheen, 419.

⁸⁵ Qāsīm Buraysam, 228.

The aftermath of the uprisings culminated in a house to house arrest in the Shi'i southern part of Iraq. Consequently, according to Buraysam, there was no Iranian detainees amongst the six thousands who were admitted to the al-Radwaniya prison camp. This bolsters the argument that the Iranian intervention was indeed rhetorical.

⁸⁶ Abd al-Jabbar Faleh, 13.

As for the other bordering countries, such as Syria and Saudi Arabia, the concept of democracy in Iraq was more troubling than a dysfunctional Ba'ath regime in Iraq.⁸⁷

The Iraqi uprisings were novel. As the first genuine uprisings in the region, they arguably paved the way for future uprisings, such as the Egyptian and Libyan uprisings two decades later. However, at the time, despite being praised by some as being the first genuinely Arabic intifada in the totalitarian-governed region, they were unwelcome by others, and thus suppressed.

Faleh argued, "given that the U.N mandate did not call for the removal of Saddam Hussein, it was left for the Iraqis to remove him from power."⁸⁸ Unfortunately, this was reversed in the aftermath of the intifada. Instead, the prevailing Ba'ath regime had removed and stripped the nation state from its human dignity:

The uprisings were drowned in blood, the scenes of brief, mass executions were exhibited before the eyes of the world and Iraq that still is a wonderland of terror.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Abd al-Jabbar Faleh, 13.

⁸⁸ Nasser Rashid and Esber Shaheen, 440.

⁸⁹ Abd al-Jabbar Faleh, 13.

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