

### **Personal leadership style and foreign policy decision making: the case of Saddam Hussein's decision to attack Kuwait**

*The problem of foreign policy constraints, especially as regards the process of decision making as such, has long been at the forefront of academic discussion, particularly in respect of exact factors that may determine the approaches followed by political leaders in that context. Personality tends to determine the way in which the respective actors respond to the decision-making alternatives available, as well as perceive the symbolic and social context in which they have to act. In authoritarian political regimes, the role of political leaders is likely to be characterised by a far higher degree of decision-making independence, due to their domestic societies being held in check by the apparatuses of state violence. Thus the case of Saddam Hussein's decision to invade Kuwait in 1990 may be seen as an important case study in regard of the aforementioned.*

The impact of Saddam Hussein's personality and individual leadership style on the foreign policy of Iraq under the rule of the Ba'ath Party after 1979 should by no means be underestimated, since the Iraqi state of that period could be characterised as a sultanistic regime. A sultanistic autocrat "exercises his power without restraint at his own discretion and above all unencumbered by rules or by any commitment to an ideology or value system" [3, p.151]. While this definition may be criticised in the light of the fact that any political regime needs some value system to impose the idea of its legitimacy upon its subjects, it may be argued that Saddam Hussein's regime was sultanistic insofar as the government of Iraq was in fact subjugated to his family and close circle, as opposed to more ideological cadres of the old Ba'ath Party under his predecessor, General Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr (1968-1979).

Saddam Hussein's sultanistic tendencies could thus be expected to manifest themselves in the course of Iraqi foreign policy under his rule. Indeed, the outbreak of the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War, which may be argued to contribute to the long-term instability of Iraq and lead Hussein to embark on a new adventure in Kuwait, can be explained in the view of Hussein's belief that Iran's post-1979 revolutionary regime represented a serious threat to his own personal power in Iraq so that a preventive strike must have been necessary to check that threat at its inception [2]. While Hussein had initially presented himself as the leader of the 'rejectionist' front of Arab states that were firmly opposed to any peace settlement with Israel, and would accordingly be expected to be fiercely anti-U.S., the need to find sources of material and financial support in the war against Iran led to his seeking an alliance with the United States, an attempt that culminated in the public meeting with Donald Rumsfeld in December 1983, culminating in a handshake [6]. Nevertheless, Hussein returned to his previous anti-U.S. stance after the Reagan administration's involvement in the Iran-Contra affair had been disclosed in 1988 [6]. Such abrupt turns of policy course before 1990 could be seen as the evidence of Hussein's inherently unstable foreign policy approach, as well as of the fact that his strategic decision making in such cases must have been

determined by the primacy of retaining personal power over Iraq even at the cost of renegeing on previous alliances and/or ideological commitments. However, as one may see below, several domestic and international factors might have justified the invasion of Kuwait from the viewpoint of Saddam Hussein's.

First, Hussein is likely to have followed a general belief of Iraqis that the existence of the independent emirate of Kuwait was illegitimate as the latter had supposedly been carved out of the historical Iraqi territory by the British [4, p.9]. Of course, the very concept of Kuwait having been carved out from Iraq would rest on identifying the old Ottoman Empire province of Basra with the part of 'historical' Iraq that would somehow be entitled to be united under the power of the centralised Iraqi government led by Hussein. Indicative of Hussein's personalist changes of foreign policy course was the fact that prior to 1990, Kuwait would enjoy a relatively tolerable relationship with its Iraqi neighbour. Kuwait provided "upward of \$13 billion in loans between 1980 and 1988", i.e. in the very course of the Iran-Iraq War, to the Hussein regime, and "agreed to give the revenues from 300,000-350,000 barrels per day of...oil to Iraq" to compensate for the economic sanctions against Iraq imposed by Syria in 1982 [1, p.142]. Accordingly, the aggressive pressing of complaints against Kuwait to the League of Arab States on behalf of Hussein (July 1990), which served as a prelude to the invasion itself, would come as a relative surprise to the Kuwaiti government that viewed Iran as a far more serious threat to its sovereignty.

Second, Hussein must have decided to initiate a conflict against Kuwait due to a variety of personal considerations involving the new means of supporting the existence of his regime after the relative failure of Iraqi military efforts in the Iran-Iraq War (no territory along the Gulf was gained, as opposed to the original war aims [5]). As close to 1,600,000 men had been mobilised into both the regular military and the para-military Popular Army, Hussein had to somehow occupy them with any activity that would not threaten his personal rule, since the attempts to demobilise such number of military personnel threatened to lead to the economic collapse. As noted by J.M. Long, Hussein "could not demobilize for economic and social reasons, but neither could he leave the army idle" [4, p.12]. To put it simpler, Hussein needed a new target to keep his war machine employed and loyal to him alone. The choice of Kuwait as such a target could be seen as relatively easy, given that this oil-rich state had at that time distanced itself from its traditional allies, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States [1], so that no significant opposition to the military invasion of that country would have been forecast. Furthermore, the debt that Iraq incurred to Kuwait, as mentioned above, could in such a way be annulled, thereby relieving Iraqi economy from a part of its post-war fiscal burden.

Similarly, Hussein might have felt that his previous failure to overcome Iran had undermined his attempts to present himself as a leader for the whole of the Arab world. In 1989, he experienced a major setback in this respect as Syria successfully blocked his proposal to send the Arab League peacekeepers to replace Syrian occupation forces in Lebanon [4, p.13]. This must have been seen as a humiliation so that a decisive action to demonstrate Iraqi military potential could be seen as imperative by Hussein. Together with the fact that Kuwait could then be used as a strategically important point for either checking Saudi influence or directly attacking

Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States [7], the use of Iraqi military against Kuwait would then seem justified to Hussein.

Therefore, it may be possible to summarise this presentation's argument as follows. Saddam Hussein perceived the uncertain outcome of the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War as a major threat to his regime's legitimacy and stability, especially given ethnic and denominational tensions simmering under the surface of the supposedly unified Iraqi society. In this context, Kuwait could serve as a useful diversion to avoid any doubt of Hussein's military and political competence in the post-war environment. Furthermore, Hussein sought to challenge his rivals in the Arab world, most notably Saudi Arabia, for regional leadership, thereby seeking to use Kuwait as an example of his military superiority, in order to intimidate them. In so doing, Hussein's personalist decision-making would in the long run spell doom for his regime.

### References

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