THE LEGACY OF DESERT STORM: A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

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This essay argues that the Gulf War, far from instituting a new regional order, has contributed to an imbalance in the region that could lead to further instability. A crumbling social fabric in Iraq, Kurdish fighting in the north, an intensification of the Kurdish war in Turkey, "impoverishment" of the Gulf dynasties, rising militarization of the region, and a reversal of the democratization trends of the beginning of the decade are all part of the harvest of the war. Even the Arab-Israeli peace process, a cornerstone of the new order envisaged by President Bush, in the long run can only lead, by its increasingly manifest unfairness, to further instability.

Over six years have passed since the United States and its allies proclaimed a new regional order following their lightning campaign against Iraq. At the time, few challenged the notion that Desert Storm was a new kind of war, an almost ideal war virtually without casualties—apart from a few tens of thousands of Iraqis that nobody cared very much about anyway.

It is still too early to assess the long-term impact of this military adventure. It is easier to gauge the fate of the new order announced by President George Bush in his speech to Congress on 6 March 1991, when he outlined the components of a new framework for the lasting peace and stability in the Middle East that was expected to grow out of Desert Storm.1 Instead, the harvest of that operation seems to be the destabilization of an area stretching from Turkey to Sudan, from the Gulf to Palestine. Even the signing of the Israeli-Palestinian Declaration of Principles in Washington on 13 September 1993 was not enough to check the decline into instability.

The single year of 1996 witnessed Israel's "Grapes of Wrath" assault in the spring which destroyed much of the infrastructure of southern Lebanon, and, once again, drove hundreds of thousands of Lebanese civilians from their homes. In June, a bomb attack in Saudi Arabia killed some twenty American soldiers, following an earlier attack in which five American soldiers died. In August, Jordan—the country that had expected to benefit from a swift return on peace—was shaken by food riots. That same month, fighting broke out in Iraqi Kurdistan—with Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and the United States involved directly or indirectly. In September, violent clashes erupted

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in the West Bank and Gaza between demonstrators and Palestinian police on the one side and Israeli troops on the other. And in Egypt, despite tens of thousands of arrests, the Islamists continued their armed attacks.

It will not be the first time that a Western military crusade has backfired, either immediately or decades later. Some forty years ago, in November 1956, the United Kingdom and France invaded Egypt to punish Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir for nationalizing the Suez Canal. It was not long before the two powers tasted the fruits of their pathetic colonial adventure: They were ousted from the Middle East, leaving the stage to the United States and the Soviet Union. A few years earlier, in 1953, the CIA orchestrated the overthrow of the Mossadegh government because it had nationalized Iran's oil. The discredited shah, restored to his throne, imposed a brutally repressive regime and in turn was swept away twenty-five years later by the Islamic revolution, which also put an end to the U.S. presence in Iran.

**Iraq and the Gulf after Desert Storm**

In his 6 March 1991 victory speech, George Bush declared that Saddam Hussein and those around him would be held accountable for what they had done to their own people, to the Kuwaitis, and to the entire world. Six years later, the Iraqi people are still paying a double price—a ruthless Ba'athist dictatorship plus a pitiless embargo imposed by Washington—while Saddam and his clique, however weakened on the world scene, are still firmly in power. The "oil-for-food" deal approved by the United Nations at the end of 1996 had, by late spring 1997, little concrete effect. As torture and arrests continue, children are still dying for lack of medicine. Malnutrition in the under-five age bracket approaches the levels of the drought-ridden countries of Africa's Sahil. Crime rates have risen by 50 percent. Gradually, the whole structure of Iraqi society is beginning to crumble, while the divide between the Shi'a in the south, the Sunnis in the center, and the Kurds in the north continues to widen. Geopolitics, like nature, abhors a vacuum, and this breakdown within Iraq could lead to the kind of regional conflagration that would make the offensives and counteroffensives in Kurdistan seem pale.

One of the direct results of the Gulf War was the "Provide Comfort" no-fly zone in northern Iraq, the safe haven put in place by the allies to protect Iraq's Kurds from the wrath of Saddam Hussein. But the zone arguably fanned the flames of Kurdish separatism in Turkey, where the conflict had been ongoing but escalated considerably after Desert Storm (and especially following the 1991 influx of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Kurds fleeing Iraq). With Operation Provide Comfort, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) of Turkey managed to set up bases in northern Iraq and intensified its activities, posing a threat to Turkish unity and causing Ankara to threaten to establish its own security zone inside Iraq to stop the incursions.

At the same time, the no-fly zone, from which Iraqi troops were barred, became a battlefield between warring Kurdish factions, with Iranian, Iraqi,
and Turkish troops poised to intervene. Indeed, the fighting between Mas-
soud Barzani’s Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and Jalal Talabani’s Patriotic
Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in August 1996 gave Saddam Hussein the pretext
to reenter the zone at Barzani’s invitation. Tens of thousands of civilians who
had been shunted back and forth between the warring factions were driven
from their homes by scorched earth tactics and fighting. America’s ineffect-
tual bombing of Iraqi installations in the south, its diplomatic isolation, and
its failure to cow an openly defiant Saddam figure among the more humiliat-
ing failures of American intelligence since its 1979 fiasco in Iran. The defeat
was made concrete by the “air bridge” evacuating several thousand Kurdish
and Arab collaborators of the CIA. Such setbacks have only accentuated the
divisions within the coalition that waged war in 1991, and when the mandate
for Operation Provide Comfort expired at the end of 1996 and was replaced
by a new mission dictated by the Americans, France refused to participate.

Whatever the rhetoric about not allowing aggression in the region to
stand, oil remains the main issue. On 3 September 1996, the day the United
States bombed the Iraqi military sites in the south, U.S. Defense Secretary
William Perry explained that his country’s action was not just a matter of the
Iraqi attack on Irbil, but a response to the clear threat Saddam posed to his
neighbors, to security and stability in the region, and to world oil supplies.2

At the time of the first oil shock in 1973, the Nixon administration already
had envisaged various plans to seize the oil wells of the Middle East. On 14
January 1975, James Schlesinger, then U.S. secretary of energy, declared that
it was “possible to carry out military operations if they proved necessary.”
(The editorialist of the New York Times, writing on 10 January 1975, had
been more prudent, noting with what turned out to be foresight that such an
operation would be “militarily feasible but politically disastrous.”) Clearly,
the 1975 policy remains in force, especially as the Middle Eastern (including
Iranian) share of world oil exports has been rising steadily since reaching a
low point of 38 percent in 1984 (down from a high of 60.2 percent in 1974).
According to a recent report, the Middle Eastern share increased—despite
the embargo on Iraq—to 46.1 percent in 1995 and is set to reach 60 percent
by the year 2010.3

The oil revenues, however, have not saved the Gulf dynasties from the economic disaster wrought
by Desert Storm, for which they footed the bill. Much
of the costs of the operation was paid directly into
Western coffers, with Kuwait alone having spent
some $80 billion on the war and its aftermath. Even
Saudi Arabia, the largest oil exporter in the world, has
not recovered financially from Desert Storm. Sum-
ing up the judgment of Western financial circles at the end of 1993, the
Financial Times noted: “Saudi Arabia briefly became a rich country”; the
World Bank had placed it in the category of “countries of medium revenue.”4
Several months later, the IMF, predicting that in the absence of structural
reforms Saudi Arabia’s debt would reach 77 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) by 1998, called for the reduction of unproductive spending, the reorganization of public expenditures, and the implementation of supplementary measures aimed at a lasting increase in nonoil revenues. Public expenditures in the Gulf states were duly cut back, causing considerable discontent in countries where state spending had long assured social peace. On the other hand, military spending continued to grow.

In February 1991, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker III declared to the House Foreign Affairs Committee: “The time has come to try to change the destructive pattern of military competition and proliferation in the region and to reduce arms flow into an area that is already overmilitarized.” Despite these lofty words and the impossible budgetary situation of the Gulf states, the United States continued to encourage arms exports to support its own arms industry, in crisis since the end of the cold war. Indeed, a February 1995 directive on arms transfers from President Clinton is quoted in the Washington Post as instructing that sales be evaluated in terms of “the impact on U.S. industry and the defense industrial base.”

According to the Arms Control Association of Washington, D.C., the Gulf states have signed contracts for $36 billion in U.S. arms since the Gulf War, almost a third of U.S. arms exports worldwide during the same period. The 1994 report of the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, the first published since Desert Storm, the Middle East spent more on arms than any other region: 20.1 percent of the GDP and 54.8 percent of overall expenditures. Most of this money was paid to the United States, which with the disappearance of the Soviet Union has become the principal supplier of the third world, and notably of the Gulf countries, marginalizing its most direct competitors, France and the United Kingdom.

These expenditures, however, have not resulted in the consolidation of the defense of the Gulf countries—quite the contrary. Lacking real legitimacy, the Gulf monarchies are incapable of guaranteeing either their own dynastic survival or that of their states, despite the vast sums they have lavished on state-of-the-art weaponry. For the first time since 1971, when the British withdrew their troops east of Suez, the security of this vital area is in the hands of foreign forces: recolonization by another name. The continued presence of American troops is the rallying point for opposition movements outraged at the incompetence and corruption of their leaders, the suffering inflicted on the Iraqi people, and Washington’s continuing support of Israel. Religious leaders in Saudi Arabia condemn the presence of infidel troops on sacred land, home to Islam’s holy cities of Mecca and Medina. The attack on the U.S. base at Dahran on 25 June 1996 confirmed that the opposition is becoming increasingly radical. The bombing also led the United States and Saudi Arabia to move American soldiers to bases far from the cities in an effort to shield them from popular wrath.

American “protection,” like Desert Storm, is paid for in full by the local governments. Thus, each joint military exercise with Kuwait costs some $10
million, entirely covered by the emirate. Each deployment of American troops in the face of an imminent “Iraqi threat” is also paid by the dynasties. Because of anti-American feeling among their populations, leaders in the peninsula on several occasions have had to distance themselves from Washington, particularly by refusing to endorse the September 1996 U.S. bombing raids on Iraq. Saudi Arabia even banned the use of its airfields.

The Peace Process

But surely, some might object, the Gulf War has at least allowed peace talks to start between Israelis and Palestinians? Along with regional security, arms reduction, and economic development, the settlement of regional conflicts was the fourth prerequisite to lasting Middle East stability that President Bush spelled out in 1991. To be sure, the Madrid conference, a consequence of the Gulf War, was aimed at resolving first and foremost the Palestinian-Israeli component of the Arab-Israeli conflict, even though the PLO was excluded and the Palestinian representatives, from the West Bank and Gaza only, had to be part of the Jordanian delegation. When these negotiations ground to a halt, back channel negotiations between Israel and the PLO led to the Oslo Accord, a document deeply marked by the crushing balance of power in Israel’s favor as well as by oversights on the part of the Palestinian leaders. Thus, while the PLO recognized Israel, Israel did not recognize the Palestinian right to statehood. Even more serious was the exclusion of all UN resolutions on Palestine, including UN General Assembly Resolution 181 of 29 November 1947 on which the two-state solution is based.9

Nevertheless, the signing of the Oslo Accord by Yitzhak Rabin and Yasir Arafat in Washington on 13 September 1993 gave grounds for optimism. The text was loose, imprecise, and open to interpretation, but there were justifiable hopes that it could create a new momentum based on recognition of the Palestinians’ right to a state and of Israel’s right to peace and security. Nothing of the sort occurred—violence has continued, Palestinian living standards have declined, movement for Palestinians within the West Bank has become increasingly difficult and between the West Bank and Gaza virtually impossible, and Israeli settlements continue to grow. Israel’s insistence on beginning a new settlement of Har Homa in East Jerusalem in March 1997 appears to have brought the peace process in any meaningful sense to a halt.

Even before Israel’s provocative move, the Hebron protocol signed on 15 January 1997, billed as an important step forward by the international community, only confirmed the unjust and therefore unstable nature of the “peace” that was unfolding. Hebron was dismembered under conditions that would have roused general indignation anywhere else: For the sake of about 150 Israeli settlers and a few hundred Yeshiva students, 20 percent of Hebron, including the entire historic and commercial center, and some 20,000 Palestinians must remain under direct Israeli military occupation.

Even with the new redeployment following the Hebron agreement, Palestinian autonomy remains limited to less than 10 percent of the West Bank.
This means a few cities and smaller enclaves hemmed in by Israeli soldiers and expanding settlements—in other words, so many Bantustans. According to the agreements concluded, the Israeli army is to carry out two further redeployments by August 1998, but the United States has recognized, in the Hebron protocol and side letters, that Israel alone has the right to determine their scope in keeping with its security needs. As for the economic agreement, if it was unequal from the outset, it has now lost all meaning on account of the closures.

Despite all this, Arafat and the PLO seem compelled to make yet more concessions to reach a final agreement. As Yossi Beilin, a former Labor minister and one of the architects of Oslo, recently noted:

The Israeli common denominator [between Labor and the right] is broader than appears to many of us, and the common denominator between us and the Palestinians [i.e., the PLO leaders] could be a surprise. A permanent status in the framework of which Jerusalem is recognized as the capital of Israel is feasible: Just as an agreement is possible without a return to 1967 borders, no return of Palestinian refugees to sovereign Israel, most of the settlers living under Israeli sovereignty, and no uprooting of settlements beyond the borders of sovereign Israel.10

This consensus took concrete form in a joint document signed by Knesset members from Labor and Likud immediately following the Hebron protocol.11

Knowledgeable Israeli commentators have estimated that the Palestinians will end up with 45–50 percent of the West Bank and Gaza. The idea of a Palestinian state on less than half of the occupied territories—themselves less than 25 percent of mandatory Palestine—divided among noncontiguous enclaves is in total contradiction to thirty years of UN resolutions, to say nothing of the political and economic inviability of such an entity. And then there are the millions of Palestinians scattered across Libya, Syria, Jordan, and elsewhere. Who is to protect them? Who will dissuade them from violence?

The almost inevitable failure of the peace process is, above all, the failure of the United States, which has become more and more blinkered since the Gulf War confirmed its position as sole superpower. President Bill Clinton must soon address these issues if American power is to remain undiminished in the region. Time presses: In the Middle East, the absence of peace is almost always a prelude to war. The crunch of boots can already be heard at the borders between Israel and Syria and between Israel and Lebanon.

The Fate of Democratization

At the end of the 1980s, the collapse of the communist regimes, the depth of the economic crisis, and the aspirations of younger generations in crisis-
riven countries had led to a tentative reaching out for political reform in the Mashriq and Maghrib. In Jordan, Yemen, Egypt, parts of the Gulf, as well as in Algeria and Tunisia, prospects of freedom, however limited, were opening up. Arab regimes, whether dynastic or of one-party rule, everywhere were discredited. The economic, political, ideological, and cultural crisis was too deep for them to pretend to resolve alone, and it looked as if democratic reform might be one way to dilute their own responsibility.

The progress toward democracy promised in the wake of the Gulf War has turned out to be illusory. Two years after the Gulf War, James Schlesinger, former defense secretary, wrote with unusual candor: “Do we seriously want to change the institutions of Saudi Arabia? The brief answer is no; over the years we have sought to preserve these institutions, sometimes in preference to more democratic forces coursing throughout the region. King Fahd has stated quite unequivocally that democratic institutions are not appropriate for this society. What is interesting is that we do not seem to disagree.”

The Gulf War brought lasting discredit to the West’s talk of human rights and democracy. The war was perceived by Arab opinion—with good reason—as a war for oil and hegemony, not a war for justice or principle. The fact that the Gulf regimes failed to enact any notable reforms seemed to confirm this assessment. The intellectuals who had been able to mobilize themselves at the end of the 1980s to defend human rights found themselves even more isolated. The manifestly unjust nature of the peace with Israel also struck a blow to the development of democracy in the region.

The contradiction between “Pax Americana” and democracy has not been sufficiently emphasized. In Jordan, King Hussein, who in 1989 had allowed new parliamentary elections in an unprecedentedly free environment, has reverted to traditional authoritarianism in order to impose his peace treaty with Israel. In Yemen, the democratic opening at the beginning of the decade could not withstand the pressures of the Gulf War, the ostracism of the Gulf monarchies, and the sudden return of hundreds of thousands of Yemeni workers expelled by Saudi Arabia; the resulting economic and political turmoil led to a showdown and then a civil war between President Ali Abdullah Saleh and the socialists of the south; the strict curtailment of freedoms continues to this day. In Egypt, President Husni Mubarak has eroded the few shreds of freedom of which his country could boast in the name of the fight against political Islam. In Bahrain, the violent two-year battle to reestablish an elected parliament has come up against a brick wall. Even in Palestine, which many observers had hoped would be the truest democracy in the Arab world, the experiment has been more than disappointing. At the behest of Israel and the United States, Arafat has already put in place multiple security agencies numbering almost 30,000 men, which account for over a third of the Palestinian Authority’s (PA) current expenditure. Neither the
Palestinians' State Security Court in Gaza (housing a CIA unit) nor their arbitrary arrests and torture have prompted any serious complaints by the international community; indeed, the U.S. government has seen fit to praise the PA for its security efforts.15

With ongoing conflicts in the region, a "peace" that promises to be unjust, and absence of human rights, the order born of the Gulf War looks more like disorder. In fact, the new order looks more and more like the old order, unstable and unfair, unstable because unfair. The gulf is widening between the self-assured, domineering West and the crisis-torn Middle East, which is finding in Islam, as it did at the time of the Crusades, a last straw to grasp in its fight for justice and dignity. The two worlds, in the near future, could pay dearly for this gulf of misunderstanding.

Who remembers that Samson ended his life in Gaza? Imprisoned, weakened, and blinded, he was fetched by the Philistines. "And Samson took hold of the two middle pillars upon which the house stood, and on which it was borne up, of the one with his right hand, and of the other with his left. And Samson said, Let me die with the Philistines. And he bowed himself with all his might; and the house fell upon the lords, and upon all the people that were therein. So the dead which he slew at his death were more than they which he slew in his life."14

NOTES

3. *Arab Oil and Gas*, 1 October 1997.
7. Ibid.