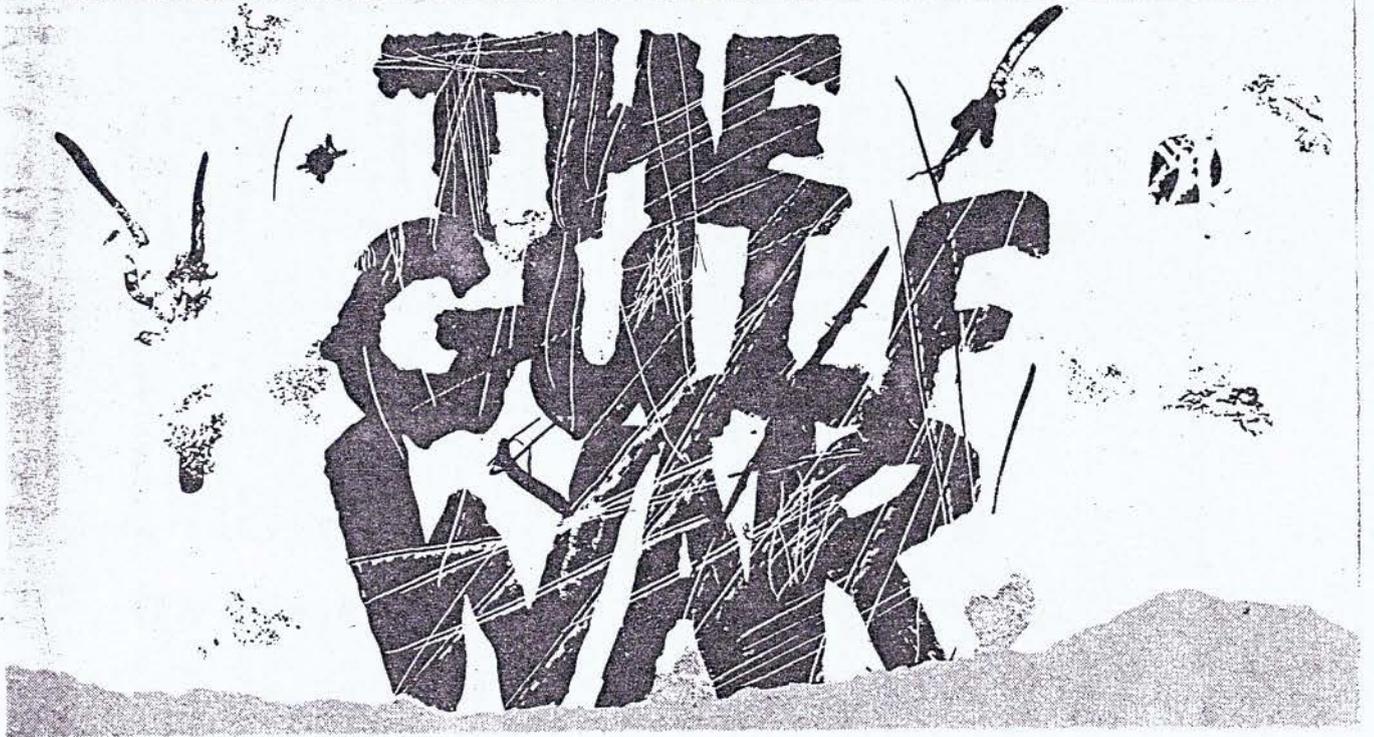


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After Desert Storm, no real change in Mideast

By DANIEL PIPES
Special to the Exponent

Interviewed a year ago in the Exponent, right on the eve of the war with Iraq, I remarked that the crisis over Kuwait "is the biggest event since World War II. We can only just begin to imagine the implications for every [international] problem — from oil to terrorism."

Old verities and structures seemed moribund. As the first crisis to see Russia and America on the same side in nearly 50 years, the confrontation with Iraq augured

a new political era. As the first buildup to war to feature the threat of missile attacks, it also marked a new military era.

Other important features included the 30-country coalition, the expected demise of the Vietnam syndrome in the United States and a powerful signal to potential aggressors around the world.

As for the Middle East specifically, everything appeared in flux. Two states — Kuwait and Lebanon — lost sovereignty in two months, enemies became allies and huge debts disappeared. The assertion of American might so eliminated the stigma among Arab states of close ties with the United States that, for the first time, they proudly wore their U.S. connection.

Even so famous an anti-American as Hafez Assad of Syria joined the U.S.-led coalition; more astonishing yet, Syrian

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troops stood alongside Americans in Saudi Arabia. Anti-Zionism drifted to the sidelines as Arab states concentrated on hostilities in the Gulf. Saudis abandoned their usual timidity in Arab politics and openly attacked those who failed them in their hour of need. (They called Yasir Arafat "that clown," for example.)

Conquest and occupation turned Kuwaiti playboys into resistance fighters and hesitant diplomats into resolute allies.

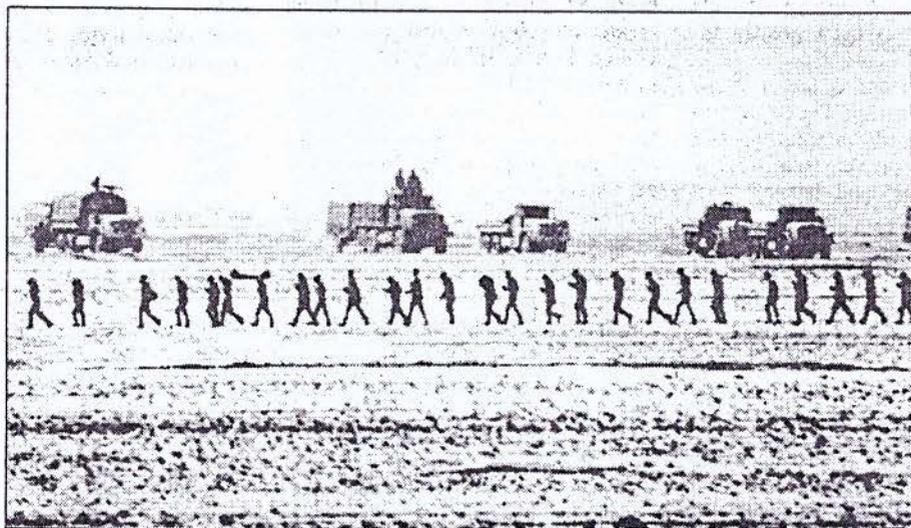
Well, a year later I'm not quite so convinced of that eve-of-the-war assertion.

Of course, Operation Desert Storm did lead to some important developments in the Middle East. Iraqi power disappeared almost overnight. Kurds are increasingly autonomous. Arabs and Israelis are meeting regularly and talking, and the opposition to these talks is minimal.

Reversing a standard policy, the Syrians are willing officially to meet Israelis and even utter phrases like "land for peace." After 70 years of rejectionism, Palestinians have made their first tentative moves toward compromise.

But these are hardly earth-shaking changes. Look what did *not* happen. The coalition against Iraq did not start a new era in U.S.-Soviet relations; instead, the Soviet Union promptly disappeared. The coalition now appears to have been a one-time thing; is anyone stopping Serbian aggression? The Vietnam syndrome may be weaker but it's not gone; nor is it all that important at a time when economic protectionism is the key issue. The debate over American use of force hasn't changed that much.

In the Middle East, much remains surprisingly as it was. Saddam Hussein



A powerful image from the Gulf War: Only hours into the first day of the ground war, Feb. 24, 1991, Iraqi soldiers, many hungry and ill-equipped, surrender by the thousands to the Marines' 2nd Division in Kuwait.

RNS Photo

remains in power, barbaric, truculent and deceitful as ever. Back home, Kuwaitis have reverted as thoroughly as possible to their pre-invasion way of life. PLO leaders learned nothing and forgot nothing. Other than making efforts to win favor with Washington, the Syrian government remains the same as before — building an arsenal, ruling Lebanon, trying to dominate the Palestinians, trafficking in drugs.

Overall, the war jiggled a great deal without spurring the range of fundamental changes I expected.

Why did so little change? In part, this has to do with the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Kuwaiti crisis and the war

against Iraq almost disappeared because of the press of other developments. The whole event feels long ago, and quite apart from today's immediate concerns.

The nature of the Middle East, a region with an incorrigible tendency to domination and strife, also has something to do with the lack of change. This is a place where ethnic- and religious-based hatreds last for generations, where political passions regularly overrule economic requirements, and where the imperatives of dictatorial rule negate democratic or humane leanings.

It is also a region that marches to its own beat, nearly immune to such happy global

developments as democratization, increased respect for human rights and greater scope for the market. Rule of law remains an exception, as does freedom of expression and sustained economic growth.

This melancholic conclusion implies the need to use caution when predicting change in the Middle East. The Kuwait war is not the only event to have come and gone. Anwar Sadat's trip to Jerusalem failed to shake up the region as much as expected, as did the Iraq-Iran war and the *intifada*.

Even the Iranian Revolution, after 13 years, has had a smaller impact than seemed likely at its start. Details shift, but the basic picture remains surprisingly stagnant.

Americans should learn to keep their aspirations modest when it comes to the Middle East. With the exception of the Middle East's two democracies — Turkey and Israel — Washington should keep its distance. To get too involved permits the misdeeds and failures of others to become our own.

Our will and our means are limited: We probably cannot reconstruct Iraq as we did Japan or Germany. Nor is our example likely to prevail; Egyptians and Saudis have little use for our political system.

This is not a call for disengagement, much less isolationism. As in the case of Iraqi aggression, the U.S. government should use its influence to address specific problems: the security of Israel, the stability of moderate Arab regimes, the free flow of oil, and the suppression of terrorism. But it must know its limits and not believe that the region is amenable to improvements along American lines. ■