CHAPTER 2

Iraq versus the United States

On August 2, 1990, Iraq launched a massive surprise attack on Kuwait. Within forty-eight hours, Iraq effectively controlled the country. Saddam Hussein and his lieutenants undertook this action despite the expectation that the United States would oppose the invasion and respond in some way. Iraq subsequently resisted US efforts to compel Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait. Iraqi documents captured after the 2003 US invasion make it clear that the Iraqi leadership took the US nuclear arsenal very seriously. Why, then, did Iraq invade Kuwait knowing it would invite some form of American response, and subsequently resist American demands? This is particularly puzzling because Iraq's own nuclear program was progressing rapidly. Had Saddam Hussein waited a few more years he might have possessed his own, albeit limited, nuclear deterrent.[1]

Iraqi leadership believed that as long as the conflicts were kept limited, the United States would be unlikely to use nuclear weapons for fear of incurring strategic costs that would outweigh the benefits it could expect from nuclear use. From the perspective of the Iraqi leadership, the domestic and international situation was bleak and growing worse in 1990. Iraq attacked Kuwait in an effort to redress these problems and then settled into a defensive posture to await the American response. Even though Iraq was a relatively weak actor, Iraqi leaders considered the possibility that the United States might use nuclear weapons if Iraq inflicted large losses on US forces and the Americans were unwilling to seek a negotiated settlement. Consistent with my argument, Iraqi leaders recognized that in such an eventuality the benefits of using nuclear weapons might increase. The Iraqis sought external support but, finding it lacking, focused on the potential costs that reduced the incentives for the US to use nuclear weapons, such as the destruction of valuable targets, particularly oil, and Iraqi use of chemical weapons against American regional allies. Iraqi leaders also hedged by preparing for a possible nuclear strike in the event they

misjudged the threshold for nuclear strikes. In 2003, Iraq was willing to concede to most American demands but ultimately chose to fight when it was clear that the United States would settle for nothing less than regime change. Faced with the destruction of the regime, Iraqi resistance is less puzzling. I therefore focus on the 1990–1991 case, only briefly outlining the background to the 2003 war.

This chapter draws heavily on private conversations within the Iraqi government, from documents captured by the United States after the 2003 invasion. In addition to relying on published collections of these documents, I also examined several hundred pages held at the Conflict Records Research Center in Washington, DC. These sources provide an invaluable insight into the inner workings of a dictatorial regime. They also demonstrate quite clearly that the Iraqi leadership factored US nuclear capabilities into their decision making, particularly in the lead-up to and prosecution of the 1991 Gulf War. I supplement these sources with American interviews with key Iraqi officials from the 1980s through the 2000s. For instance, I include unclassified interviews the FBI conducted with Saddam Hussein in 2004. Finally, as in the other chapters, I also rely on secondary accounts and American documents to explain additional aspects of the case.

The rest of this chapter presents the argument in three sections. First, I review the nuclear and conventional military balance. Second, I discuss the background for Iraqi behavior during the period of American nuclear monopoly beginning in 1979 when Saddam Hussein was officially Iraqi president, focusing most heavily on events in 1989–1991. Finally, I examine Iraqi behavior and views on the American nuclear arsenal, ending with a summary of key points from the chapter.

The Military Balance

The United States had an atomic monopoly against Iraq throughout Saddam Hussein's tenure as Iraq's leader. In addition, the US conventional military advantage was very large, and Iraq had no way to strike the US homeland.

THE NUCLEAR BALANCE

Though the George H. W. Bush administration drastically reduced the number of deployed nuclear weapons during its term (see table 2.1), the United States maintained an obvious and overwhelming nuclear capability. The US possessed nuclear platforms capable of striking any part of Iraq. Iraq had no defense against such capabilities.

Table 2.1 US nuclear weapons, 1979–2003

Year	*Total nuclear warheads*	*Strategic nuclear warheads*	*Estimated total yield (megatons)*
1979	24,138	11,088	5,696.34
1980	24,104	10,768	5,618.86
1981	23,208	10,464	5,382.91
1982	22,886	10,291	5,358.89
1983	23,305	10,610	5,232.47
1984	23,459	11,308	5,192.20
1985	23,368	11,590	5,217.48
1986	23,317	12,314	5,414.54
1987	23,575	13,685	4,882.14
1988	23,205	13,080	4,789.77
1989	22,217	12,780	4,743.34
1990	21,392	12,304	4,518.91
1991	19,008	9,300	3,795.94
1992	13,708	8,280	3,167.88
1993	11,511	7,528	2,647.31
1994	10,979	7,688	2,375.30
1995	10,904	7,248	2,300.00
1996	11,011	6,862	2,301.50
1997	10,903	6,286	1,935.88
1998	10,732	6,236	1,937.13
1999	10,685	6,298	2,016.05
2000	10,577	6,298	1,982.17
2001	10,526	5,380	1,982.17
2002	10,457	5,092	1,752.32
2003	10,027	4,848	1,698.32

Sources: Department of State, "Fact Sheet: Transparency in the U.S. Nuclear Weapons Stockpile," April 29, 2014, https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/225555.pdf; "Estimated U.S. and Soviet/Russian Nuclear Stockpiles, 1945–94," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 50, no. 6 (1994): 58–59; Polmar and Norris, *U.S. Nuclear Arsenal*, 258–59.

Note: I estimated yields for 1995–2003 based on warhead counts and yields from the Nuclear Notebook series published by the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. For variable yield warheads I used the highest yield.

THE CONVENTIONAL BALANCE

The United States possessed a very large conventional advantage against Iraq. The US was far more economically developed than Iraq. In 1989, US per capita GDP was at a nearly 6:1 advantage and would grow to greater than 10:1 in the next decade (figure 2.1). The overall American economic advantage was even larger, as American GDP was always at least fifty times greater than Iraqi GDP. The US had a larger overall military than Iraq as well (figure 2.2). That advantage grew after the Iraqi defeat in 1991. Not surprisingly, the US economic edge meant that US spending per service member was much higher than Iraqi spending. True, not all US troops were deployed or were able to be deployed in the region, whereas Iraqi troops were concentrated in Iraq (and in Kuwait briefly in 1990–1991). More importantly, though, Iraq had no power projection capability that would allow it to strike the United States or even American interests and allies outside the region. In 1990, the Iraqi navy was estimated to have five thousand sailors serving primarily on five frigates and thirty-eight coastal and patrol ships that included six corvettes and eight Osa-class missile boats.[2] By contrast, the US could, and did on multiple occasions, deploy armies numbering in the hundreds of thousands in the area. Its naval and air forces also allowed the US to strike Iraq from platforms and bases hundreds and

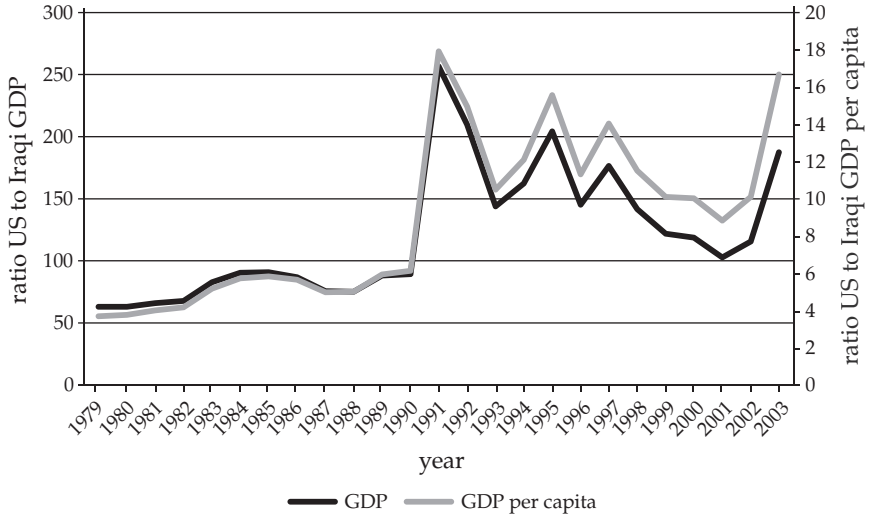

Figure 2.1 Economic ratios, 1979–2003

Source: Gleditsch Expanded GDP data version 6.0 (September 2014), http://ksgleditsch.com/exptradegdp.html.

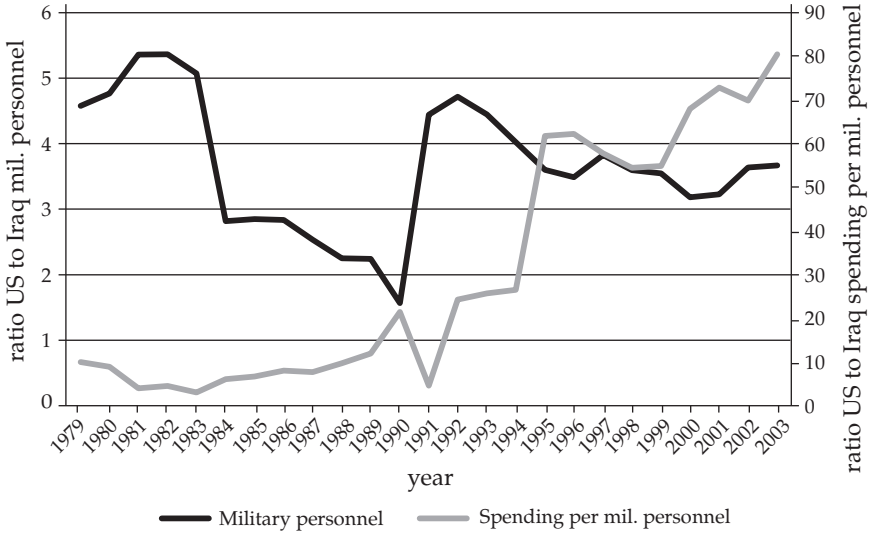

Figure 2.2 Military ratios, 1979–2003

Source: Correlates of War, National Material Capabilities, version 5.0, http://www.correlatesofwar.org/datasets/national-material-capabilities.

Note: Iraqi military expenditures estimated for 2002–2003 using 2001 data.

even thousands of miles away from Iraqi territory. In short, the US could strike Iraqi territory at will; Iraq had no equivalent capability.

The US qualitative advantage was equally decisive. On the eve of the Gulf War, the average age of US weapons was twelve years ahead of Iraqi equipment, a historically large gap.[3] The US military was a professional organization capable of implementing effective force employment techniques. The Iraqi military had gained experience during the Iran-Iraq War. Much of that skill was wasted, though, as Saddam began reinstituting coup-prevention practices after the war that strengthened his control of the regime and country at the price of battlefield effectiveness.[4] Indicative of the US advantage, the debate within the United States prior to the 1991 Gulf War was not about whether the US could defeat the Iraqi military conventionally or if Iraq posed a threat to the American homeland. US victory in any conflict was overdetermined. Rather, the debate centered on how costly victory would be for the Americans.[5] Thereafter the situation only worsened for Iraq.[6]

The Americans were largely content to rely on their conventional advantage and did not seriously integrate nuclear options into their planning even prior to the 1991 Gulf War when the Iraqi military was more formidable than in 2002–2003. My argument focuses on NNWS decision making and does not attempt to explain the decision making in the NWS. I do not seek to test my argument against US nuclear policy. The point is simply that the

limited US discussion of nuclear weapons underscores the US conventional advantage and lack of military necessity for nuclear strikes. This is not to say there was no nuclear-related discussion. In January 1991 Secretary of State James Baker issued a veiled warning to Iraq that chemical weapon use might invite nuclear retaliation.[7] In addition, Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney asked Pentagon planners, "How many tactical nukes are we going to have to use to take out an Iraqi Republican Guard division?" Those inquiries were prompted, as Cheney later put it, by a desire to know if the US got "into a situation and we have to follow through on our threat, what's that going to look like?"[8] Analysts reportedly replied that seventeen nuclear weapons would be necessary for each division. Overall, though, interest in nuclear options was low. Colin Powell, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recalled that he brushed off calls for nuclear planning: "Let's not even think about nukes. You know we're not going to let that genie loose."[9] Former US national security adviser Brent Scowcroft wrote that during a meeting of senior officials "no one advanced the notion of using nuclear weapons, and the President rejected it even in retaliation for chemical or biological attacks."[10] This was not a closely guarded secret. For instance, the *Los Angeles Times* wrote on October 2, 1990, that US military officials stated that the "United States has placed no nuclear weapons in Saudi Arabia or surrounding countries and has no plans to use them even in response to an Iraqi attack using chemical or biological weapons."[11]

Dispute Overview

The core concern of Saddam Hussein was maintaining his regime. Saddam had gradually accumulated power during the 1970s, culminating in his ascension to the presidency on July 16, 1979, following the resignation (willingly or not) of Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr.[12] As Phil Haun writes, the Iraqi dictator's "dominant and perpetual concern was for his political and personal survival."[13] True, Iraqi leaders at times harbored broader regional ambitions. Saddam sought to place Iraq, at least at the rhetorical level, at the center of a new pan-Arabism following the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty in 1979.[14] Iraq also occasionally joined efforts to confront nuclear-armed Israel before and after the 1968 Ba'athist takeover. That support was always limited, and Iraq was a small player as others states, usually Egypt, were at the center of those confrontations. Moreover, Saddam explicitly argued that without nuclear weapons a major confrontation with Israel would be too dangerous. In such a war, Saddam mused, "Israel is going to say, 'We will hit you with the atomic bomb.' So should the Arabs stop or not? If they do not have the atom, they will stop."[15] As Hal Brands and David Palkki note, Saddam "believed that an Iraqi bomb would neutralize Israeli nuclear threats, force the Jewish state to fight at the conventional level, and thereby

allow Iraq and its Arab allies to prosecute a prolonged war that would displace Israel from the territories occupied in 1967."[16]

Throughout the 1980s Iraq avoided confrontations with the United States. Iraq's deadly war with Iran provided Saddam little room for maneuver elsewhere. Iraqi leaders continued to harbor doubts about US intentions, though. Those fears were reinforced by the Iran-Contra scandal involving US weapons sales to Iran, which Saddam worried portended a long-term danger. But Iraq also relied on several forms of US support during the war and did not perceive an immediate threat.[17] That situation changed at the end of the 1980s.

Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, expecting that the United States would oppose the operation. True, Iraqi leaders may not have predicted the full scope of the US ground campaign, but they did consider military action a strong possibility. In short, the Iraqis were not deterred for fear of US retaliation. As Dianne Pfundstein Chamberlain concludes, "Saddam anticipated an American response to the annexation. That is, he knew that the United States had a lot of raw military capability and was likely to use it against him, but he chose to invade Kuwait anyway."[18] Tariq Aziz, the Iraqi foreign minister and longtime Saddam confidant, later stated that "we had no illusions that the Americans will not retaliate against being in Kuwait because they knew that this was a conflict between the two of us—Iraq and the United States."[19] After conquering Kuwait, Iraq then resisted US compellent demands to withdraw, choosing instead to fight a war.

Two factors pushed Iraq to action. First, Iraq's economic situation deteriorated following the Iran-Iraq War, with little hope for improvement. Despite a slight improvement at the end of the war, the trend quickly reversed itself. Iraqi per capita GDP was lower in 1990 than in 1980.[20] To complicate matters, Iraq owed at least $80 billion to its neighbors. The Iraqi government dedicated 22 percent of its budget to service this debt by 1989. Saudi Arabia was willing to restructure the terms. Kuwait, however, elected to use the issue as leverage to settle long-standing disputes.[21] A decline in world oil prices was also cutting deeply into Iraqi revenue. Though global oil prices had recovered somewhat at the end of the decade, they were well below prices from the end of the 1970s (figure 2.3). Saddam maintained in 2004 that "at the end of the [Iran-Iraq] war as Iraq began the rebuilding process, the price of oil was approximately $7 a barrel. . . . Iraq could not possibly rebuild its infrastructure and economy with oil prices at this level. Kuwait was especially at fault regarding these low oil prices."[22] The poor condition of Iraqi infrastructure left the regime unable to increase oil production to offset the lower prices.

Second, there was fear that foreign collusion spearheaded by the United States sought to destabilize the regime. Iraqi leadership became convinced that the United States was urging Kuwait to deliberately undermine Iraqi stability.[23] In May 1990 the Iraqi General Military Intelligence Directorate

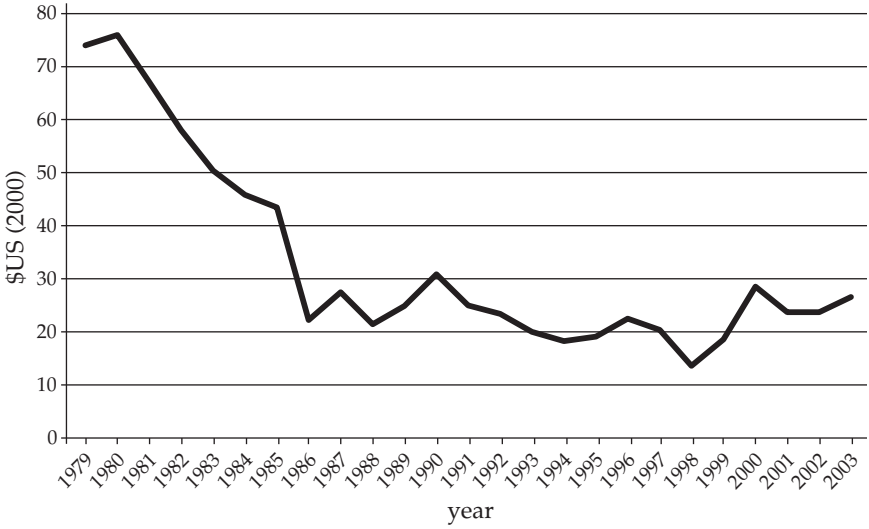

Figure 2.3 Oil prices per barrel, 1979–2003

Source: Quality of Governance Standard Data (January 2018), Ross Oil Prices, https://qog.pol.gu.se/data/datadownloads/qogstandarddata.

(GMID) reported that both "the United States of America and Britain are trying to create a political climate suitable for directing a hostile strike against the country."[24] This reflected Saddam's thinking, as he reportedly told the GMID deputy director in March that "America is coordinating with Saudi Arabia and the [United Arab Emirates] and Kuwait in a conspiracy against us. They are trying to reduce the price of oil to affect our military industries and our scientific research, to force us to reduce the size of our armed forces."[25] As Aziz explained several years later, "We started to realize that there is a conspiracy against Iraq, a deliberate conspiracy against Iraq, by Kuwait, organized, devised by the United States."[26] US-Kuwaiti military cooperation reinforced Iraqi paranoia. Saddam recalled that the "visit of US General [Norman] Schwarzkopf to Kuwait also provided further confirmation" of nefarious American intentions.[27] The US ambassador to Iraq April Glaspie reported in March 1991 that the Iraqis were "quite convinced that the United States . . . was targeting Iraq. They complained about it all the time. . . . Day after day, the Iraqi media since February [1990]—literally every day—was full of these accusations. And I think it was genuinely believed by Saddam Hussein."[28]

The worsening economic condition and perception of increasing US hostility caused Iraq to bring the issue to a head. Without action on its part, Baghdad feared, external forces would continue their efforts and lead to the collapse of the regime. Aziz recalled that "when we came to that conclusion

[that there was a conspiracy] then we started thinking of how to react against the future aggressors on Iraq."[29] Failing to act would result in the collapse of the regime or force Iraq to fight in the future under worse circumstances. Saddam likened Iraq's situation to "an army standing before a landmine, when they stop, the artillery will finish them. [T]o overcome the landmines, they must pass it as quickly as possible and not stand before it. It is the same thing with the International [community], if we were to stop, we could be exposed to the death of our regime."[30] In 2003 he told FBI interviewers that Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990 to "defend by attacking."[31] Taha Ramadan reiterated this line of thinking in a Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) meeting after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

> Imagine if we had waited two years, and the Gulf oil policy had continued as it is. Iraq is $50 billion in debt and the price of oil does not meet 50% of our even minimal needs. . . . The Western states and America decided to stop exporting technology to us after April 1990, and America stopped agricultural facilities [subsidized exports to Iraq] in March 1990. . . . How were we going to maintain the loyalty of the people and their support for the leader if they saw the inability of the leadership to provide a minimal standard of living in this rich country? . . . If death is definitely coming to this people and this revolution, let it come while we are standing.[32]

These were genuine and widely shared concerns. To be sure, many internal reports and statements were influenced by what the authors thought Saddam would want to hear. There was nevertheless real debate on a number of issues in the RCC; yet most members subscribed to the basic thesis that the United States was a growing source of danger. While there was hope for a positive relationship at times, Iraqi leaders had developed a widely held narrative that the US had worked to undermine the Ba'ath regime in the past. Moreover, the Iraqis' complaints had a basis in real events, even if their conclusions were ultimately flawed. Iraq's economy was suffering, Kuwait was proving obstinate, and the United States was gradually—though still with only a light footprint at the time—increasing its military presence in the region and its ties to various Gulf states.[33] Given the tendency for individuals, including those in the United States, to at times take basic data and draw elaborate, and false, conspiratorial conclusions, it should not be particularly surprising that Iraqi leaders, accustomed to distrust, did so as well.[34]

Iraq subsequently undertook several policy initiatives. In July, Saddam demanded Kuwait pay $2.4 billion for a disputed oil field, $12 billion for depressing oil prices, forgive Iraq's $10 billion debt, and agree to a long-term lease of Bubiyan Island.[35] Kuwait refused, triggering the subsequent invasion in the early morning hours of August 2, 1990. Saddam tasked the elite Republican Guard with the operation. They did not disappoint. In under forty-eight hours Iraq effectively controlled the country.

As noted, Iraqi leaders expected the United States would react in some way. They did not believe they had received a "green light" from Ambassador Glaspie in a July 25 meeting. The Iraqi version of the meeting released to Western media quotes Glaspie as stating that the United States had "no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts, like your border disagreement with Kuwait."[36] The American record, by contrast, notes that the "border question" referenced the specific location of the border, with Kuwait allegedly claiming an additional twenty kilometers. The issue was not control of all or even a large part of Kuwait. Furthermore, Glaspie "made clear that we can never excuse settlement of disputes by other than peaceful means."[37] Three days later, Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger instructed Glaspie to inform Saddam that President Bush believed "that differences are best resolved by peaceful means and not by threats involving military force or conflict."[38]

Several additional pieces of evidence point to the conclusion that Saddam suspected some type of US opposition. First, there has been no record found (at least so far) of Saddam or his lieutenants discussing the Glaspie meeting prior to the invasion.[39] Such an absence of discussion would be odd if the meeting had figured prominently in Iraqi decision making. Nevertheless, an absence of evidence is hardly conclusive; it simply may not have been recorded. Second, and more directly, on the same day as the Glaspie meeting, the Iraqi GMID reported that "the United States declared that it would intervene to help Kuwait if there was any serious threat."[40] Indeed, the whole premise of the Iraqi concern was that the United States was aiding and emboldening Kuwait. It would have made little sense, then, for Iraq to believe that the United States would abandon Kuwait. Tariq Aziz admitted as much in 1996, stating that Glaspie "didn't tell us anything strange. She didn't tell us in the sense that we concluded that the Americans will not retaliate. That was nonsense you see. It was nonsense to think that the Americans would not attack us."[41] Third, Saddam most likely agreed with the GMID and Aziz's assessment. As he told Glaspie on July 25, he understood that the United States "can send planes and rockets and hurt Iraq deeply." At some point, though, the danger to Iraq would compel action.[42] After the invasion, Saddam told the Yemeni president that Iraq had taken into consideration the possibility of American naval and air strikes and later told his advisers that the United States might institute "a complete boycott" and "strike us in the air, land, and sea—everywhere."[43]

Though the United States had not issued a specific deterrent threat, then, the more general American deterrent had failed.[44] After the Iraqi invasion, the US quickly began deploying forces to the region to deter any further Iraqi aggression while simultaneously compelling Iraq to leave Kuwait. The US also mobilized a worldwide coalition of states to meet those ends. Over the next few months various United Nations resolutions ratcheted up

pressure on Iraq, culminating in UN Security Council Resolution 678 on November 29, 1990. That resolution authorized the growing US-led coalition to "use all necessary means" to force Iraqi withdrawal if Iraqi forces did not leave Kuwait by January 15, 1991.[45]

Direct American compellent efforts initially failed. Saddam and his lieutenants believed that even if they withdrew from Kuwait, the American military threat would remain. As Saddam remarked to Soviet presidential adviser Yevgeny Primakov on October 6, even if Iraq agreed to withdraw from Kuwait, "you cannot bring an end to the American siege of Iraq." Any flexibility on Iraq's part would be an invitation to continued "bargaining and blackmailing."[46] Part of the Iraqi obstinacy stemmed from the fact that the US lacked sufficient conventional ground forces in the region early in the crisis to physically evict Iraqi troops from Kuwait.[47] Moreover, Iraq launched several diplomatic offensives with the hope that they might undermine the burgeoning US-led coalition and lead to some settlement, which I discuss in more detail in the next section. Yet by January it was clear that the diplomatic effort had failed and the United States had sufficient forces to launch an assault. The Iraqi fears remained focused on the continuing danger the US posed even if Iraqi forces withdrew. "We have no guarantees if we withdraw," Saddam told Yemeni officials on January 14, 1991. "Why should we surrender at the last moment?"[48] Withdrawal would not improve the economic situation or end the American threat. On the other hand, as Haun notes, "Standing up to the United States . . . would enhance his [Saddam's] standing within Iraq and the Arab world and might present him with a political victory, even if it resulted in a military defeat."[49]

Iraq was initially willing to endure air strikes, but by mid-February 1991 its resolve was cracking. On February 15, Baghdad announced publicly for the first time a willingness to withdraw from Kuwait, but the Iraqi leadership attached a number of conditions unacceptable to the United States. Yet those conditions evaporated with time. Tariq Aziz traveled to Moscow to meet with President Mikhail Gorbachev on February 18.[50] On February 22, Aziz agreed that Iraq would "withdraw all of its troops immediately and unconditionally from Kuwait."[51] Having stood up against US airstrikes for nearly a month, Saddam had grown less concerned about a retreat causing domestic problems. Moreover, even if the United States remained in the region, Iraq's army now faced the prospect of elimination inside Kuwait. Confronted with the danger of losing an important tool to maintain internal order and defend against external threats, the Iraqi leader was willing to leave Kuwait.[52] Saddam continued to express misgivings about a rapid withdrawal, but seemed to endorse the agreement. "It is better to withdraw the troops yourself, instead of the enemy doing it for you!" he told his lieutenants on February 23.[53] Gorbachev relayed the Iraqi decision to President Bush that same day. "In Baghdad, an official statement has been issued that

agrees to full and unconditional withdrawal from Kuwait as specified in the U.N. Resolution and that it will happen from Kuwait City in 4 days. That is to say we have a white flag from Saddam Hussein."[54]

On February 22, though, President Bush had demanded that Iraq complete withdrawal in forty-eight hours, beginning at noon on February 23. Two factors were critical in the American decision.[55] First, the United States was unwilling to allow Iraq to withdraw with its army intact. If Saddam was not decisively defeated, the thinking went, Iraq could simply start new hostilities at any time. This would necessitate a large and open-ended American presence in the region. Second, Saddam's earlier decision to destroy Kuwaiti oil production to disrupt coalition air operations convinced the Americans of Iraqi duplicity. In response to coalition incursions on February 21 and 22, the commanders of the Iraqi III and IV Corps implemented part of the oil-as-weapon plan.[56] President Bush argued that "if there ever was a reason not to have a delay or wonder if they are acting in good faith, this report [of Iraqi destruction of the Kuwaiti oil fields and production system] is one. It has been presented to me as authoritative and it is very disturbing. I don't know how this man [Saddam Hussein] can continue to talk peace through the Soviets, and still be taking these kinds of actions."[57]

The US demand created a new danger for Iraqi leadership. Forty-eight hours would not be enough time to evacuate Iraqi heavy equipment from Kuwait. Postwar estimates concluded that Iraq would have had to abandon half its tanks, armored personnel carriers, and artillery. This, in turn, would have dramatically weakened Saddam's ability to fend off any subsequent attack by the United States or other regional actors as well as threaten the regime's control of the country. In other words, Saddam was willing to withdraw his army to protect the regime, but the American terms seemed to negate that option. Saddam therefore reaffirmed his willingness to accept the Soviet terms while rejecting the Bush ultimatum.[58]

The coalition ground attack, after what the Iraqi leadership believed was Iraq's offer for unconditional withdrawal, confirmed to them their reading of American intentions. "We now know the conspiracy is not only to free Kuwait, but also to occupy Iraq, remove the regime and destroy everything we have worked for," Taha Muhyi al-Din Ma'ruf stated during a meeting with Saddam on February 24.[59] In a separate meeting that same day, Saddam agreed, stating that the "Americans' objective is to [destroy] Iraq in its entirety, including its willpower."[60] After the war, Saddam declared that the United States had failed in its goal of destroying the Iraqi regime. This formed part of the basis for his claims that Iraq had won the war.[61]

The relationship from 1991 to 2003 was filled with tension and low-level disputes. Iraqi actions during this period were primarily limited probes, and after 1998 the depth of Iraqi weakness contributed to even more restrained behavior. Iraqi leaders opposed Operation Provide Comfort in

April 1991, an American humanitarian effort backed with ground forces and aircraft enforcing a no-fly zone in northern Iraq to aid the Iraqi Kurds—though at that point there was little Iraq could do.[62] Baghdad subsequently worked with local Kurdish factions at times, routing the American-backed Iraqi National Congress in northern Iraq in September 1996.[63] Iraq protested the imposition of a no-fly zone over southern Iraq in August 1992 but could do little more. The US-led efforts did not prevent Iraq from exercising control over the Shi'a-dominated South, reducing Ba'athist motivation to act. Iraqi leaders frequently frustrated efforts by the UN Special Commission for the Disarmament of Iraq (UNSCOM) and the International Atomic Energy Agency. The former was tasked with overseeing the identification and elimination of Iraqi chemical and biological weapons, while the latter focused on the nuclear program.[64] In November 1997 Iraq expelled UNSCOM inspectors. The ensuing crisis did not subside until February 23, when UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and Tariq Aziz signed a memorandum of understanding for access to specific Iraqi sites. Iraq again interfered with inspections in late 1998 following UNSCOM requests for "implementation of a more aggressive weapons inspection program."[65] The challenge to American-backed inspections led to Operation Desert Fox, a series of air and missile strikes against Iraqi targets. Only later did it become apparent that these strikes nearly caused the regime to collapse.[66]

Tensions flared again following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks by al-Qaeda against the United States. Though Iraq was not responsible for the attacks, the George W. Bush administration almost instantly began planning for an operation against Iraq. Iraq agreed in September 2002 to allow inspectors into the country "to remove any doubts that Iraq still possesse[d] weapons of mass destruction."[67] Saddam was willing to concede to American demands for access and admit that he no longer possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMD). He was not willing to step down, however. For their part, the Americans were ill-disposed to believe the Iraqi leaders' newfound openness. A decade of obfuscation and lack of reliable intelligence after Operation Desert Fox contributed to American skepticism. While key figures in the Bush administration did believe Iraq had some form of a WMD program, attacking Iraq was by that point a key part of the administration's broader grand strategy.[68] On March 17, 2003, Bush delivered the final ultimatum: "Saddam Hussein and his sons must leave Iraq within 48 hours. Their refusal to do so will result in military conflict commenced at a time of our choosing."[69] Saddam elected to resist, gambling that the United States might only use air strikes or, at most, occupy the southern portion of Iraq rather than incur the full costs of regime change and occupation. This offered Saddam some small chance of remaining in power rather than ceding to US demands for regime change that guaranteed his removal and (likely) his death.

The Role of Nuclear Weapons

Iraqi behavior throughout this period conforms with my argument. The underlying political dispute, Iraqi conventional military limitations, and geography explain much of Iraq's confrontation with the United States throughout the 1979–2003 period. At the same time, precisely because Iraq posed such little danger to the United States, war was possible. Moreover, as I detail below, Iraq did factor the US nuclear arsenal into its decision making at several critical points. Iraqi leaders displayed an understanding that as the damage they inflicted on US forces increased so would the potential benefits of nuclear strikes. So long as the benefits of nuclear use remained low, the Iraqi leadership gambled that various costs would be sufficient to prevent the Americans from using their nuclear arsenal.

I focus on the 1990–1991 Gulf War in this section. During the post–Gulf War crises in the 1990s Iraq never undertook any major military action against the United States. In 2003, Iraq fought entirely on the defensive. In that case, moreover, the stated purpose of the United States to liberate the Iraqi people meant that it would have made little sense to use nuclear weapons in areas that would harm the population to be liberated; nuclear use would have been counterproductive to the political goal. Iraqi weakness in 2003, after a decade of sanctions, also made nuclear weapons militarily unnecessary. In short, the benefits of nuclear use were obviously low, and the costs—in destroying parts of the country the United States hoped to liberate—were obviously high.

IRAQI BEHAVIOR

In 1990 Iraq pursued a policy that posed no danger to the US homeland or nuclear arsenal. Iraq would launch a limited offensive to take Kuwait and then shift to a defensive posture. Iraqi control of Kuwait would not shift the global balance of power. Though there was some concern within the Bush administration that Iraq would attack Saudi Arabia, Iraq could credibly commit to halt its advance because it would have faced much greater difficulty invading and occupying even a portion of Saudi Arabia while holding Kuwait. Iraq planned for the Kuwait invasion using the strictest secrecy measures to avoid inviting an early American and international response. The Iraqi army chief of staff General Nizar al-Khazraji recalled that "the invasion was staged by the Republican Guard forces without my knowledge. It came as a surprise to me . . . [when] I was informed of the situation."[70] Saddam explained the need for stealth to his subordinates on August 2, noting that former Iraqi leader Abd al-Karim Qasim had been too transparent with his intentions to press claims on Kuwait in 1961. This allowed the British to deploy troops to Kuwait and block the Iraqi move. Iraq would not repeat the mistake.[71]

Iraq's actions matched its planning. The invasion was carried out quickly and with few casualties.[72] Saddam summed up the operation on August 7: "All that we wanted as a command was for the military operation to be carried out and then to prepare ourselves for a defensive posture under suitable circumstances. I say our timing was more than suitable. First, the operation went very quickly. Second, control of the situation was comprehensive. Third, we had ample time to prepare a defensive posture."[73] Once the invasion was complete, Iraq moved quickly to legitimize its conquest. It annexed Kuwait on August 8, and then on August 28 declared that Kuwait was Iraq's nineteenth province.[74]

To encourage some form of negotiated settlement, Iraq developed a defensive posture. In his detailed study of Iraqi decision making during the Gulf War, Kevin Woods referred to this as "a 'pufferfish' defense." Saddam reasoned that "you don't have to be bigger than your adversary, just big enough to give your enemy pause."[75] Saddam based this strategy on his perception that the United States was casualty-averse. In February 1990 he stated that "we saw that the United States, as a superpower, departed Lebanon immediately when some Marines were killed."[76] This trait led the United States to be overly dependent on air power, which Saddam privately denigrated. "I mean, what will they do if they engage in a fight?" he asked rhetorically on August 7. "All they can do is bring their airplanes and start bombing: boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. So what? . . . Give me one instance when an airplane has settled any situation. . . . Their bombing will increase the number of refugees."[77] As the American campaign unfolded, Saddam continued to rest his dwindling hopes on American sensitivities. When an aide suggested that inflicting five thousand casualties would result in victory, Saddam interrupted him, saying, "Five hundred. . . . I told my soldiers four [Iraqi soldiers killed] to one [American soldier killed]."[78]

The strategy for the defense of Kuwait followed the basic defensive logic. In the three months following the invasion, Iraq expanded its armed forces and set up defensive positions in Kuwait. As the US buildup in the region continued, Iraq began to reconsider its strategy. To that end, Iraq shifted to a defense-in-depth posture in mid-November. The Republican Guard had already fallen back, ready to act as a reserve force and plug any gaps should coalition forces break through the lines.[79] At the same time, Iraq did not undertake military activities against the coalition during the lead-up to the air campaign. Saddam was determined not to give the coalition an excuse to strike early.

The brief exception to the defensive strategy occurred on January 29, 1991, with an attack against the lightly defended Saudi Arabian town of al-Khafji. Iraq had been unable to inflict any meaningful damage against its adversaries during the first two weeks of coalition air strikes. This frustrated the basic Iraqi goal of inflicting casualties on the Americans. "It is

better that we attack the enemy while we still have our capability," the Iraqi chief of staff argued. He added that "the main purpose" of the raid "was to drag the enemy into engagements with ground formations in the most expeditious manner or the fastest way possible."[80] The assault began on the evening of the twenty-ninth, with Iraq forces briefly occupying al-Khafji on the thirtieth before withdrawing. In the end, the Iraqi military suffered major losses, with little apparent gain, though the Iraqi leadership considered the battle a major victory.[81]

Iraq also sought to raise the costs of any American action. This was done largely to forestall any US assault and provide time for a diplomatic solution. Yet if the United States avoided any assault, it would also necessarily avoid a nuclear strike. The more actors that Iraq could turn against the US, moreover, the higher the potential price the US would pay for any nuclear use. In the months immediately after the invasion of Kuwait, Wafiq al-Samarra'i reported that Saddam described his strategy as "holding on to the elephant's trunk"—in other words, waiting and drawing out events.[82] The efforts by the United States to create an "international atmosphere" for hostilities might fail. "We don't have atrocities that will evoke humanity as time passes by. On the other hand and as time passes, the human grasp languishes with regard to hostility," Saddam argued on August 7.[83] Two months later he claimed that "the purpose of prohibiting some foreigners from leaving the country [Iraq] is to increase the obstacles for the wicked enemy's intentions, especially the American officials . . . [and] to gain some time."[84] Taha Ramadan reflected Saddam's thinking that time might play to Iraq's advantage. "Time is not on the side of the Americans or those calling for a war," he noted in October, "because the later they are—the more the coalition disbands—and international opinion is now leaning towards peace."[85] Aziz suggested that the United States would not risk a war shortly before Christmas because "the president who brings corpses to his country at Christmas time will be skinned alive in the US. . . . If a war happens, they know it would not end between November 15 and December 15. It would not end in one month and they know it."[86] Ramadan adhered to his position in late November, optimistically claiming that "now we have supporters. There is a peace movement in Europe and America. . . . There is a crack in the economic sanctions and the people are starting to send stuff [to us]."[87]

Iraq contemplated pressing France and the Soviet Union to delay and perhaps restrain the United States. "As I have shared my opinion with you," Aziz counseled, "deducing that the Soviet Union has no interest in a war of this manner happening and at this large scale."[88] The Soviets were not altruistic, he argued, but might act to prevent hostilities out of sheer self-interest. Izzat al-Duri argued at the same meeting that Iraq should focus on France, stating that "European countries hide behind the French position if they want to compromise and take a more conciliatory stance

toward us, or to distance themselves from the American sanctions."[89] Others placed emphasis on France as well. "Of any country in the Security Council outside of the United States or Britain which would be able to prevent the war it would be France," noted Ramadan. He added that "France is able through its contacts to influence two or three other countries [like] Italy, Germany, [or] Spain."[90] In the end, Iraq failed to find sufficient outside support to constrain the United States or intervene on Baghdad's behalf.

Finally, two other Iraqi policies would influence the potential costs and benefits of nuclear use for the nuclear-armed opponent. Iraqi leaders refrained from using chemical or biological weapons for fear it could provoke American escalation, choosing instead to hold their unconventional weapons in reserve in the hopes they might serve as a deterrent. The Iraqi leadership also undertook several costly exercises to minimize the effects of a nuclear strike against their cities. I discuss both of these policies, and their links to the US nuclear arsenal, in the next section.

Much of the Iraqi regime's behavior—its limited offensive moves and search for outside support—is congruent with my framework but would likely have occurred with or without the American nuclear monopoly. As I argued in chapter 1, nuclear monopoly allows weaker states to pursue strategies that invite a response but do not create a major danger to the nuclear-armed state. In other words, nonnuclear factors could drive large parts of Iraqi policy precisely because that policy would not create large enough benefits from nuclear use to offset the costs to the United States of a nuclear strike. Iraqi planning centered on its limited offensive into Kuwait and then a shift to a defensive posture that posed no direct threat to the United States. Iraq's actual behavior during its initial assault on Kuwait and then in its resistance to the United States matched its planning. At the same time, Iraq leaders were cognizant that their strategy rested on inflicting losses on the Americans. As those losses mounted, so too might the benefits of nuclear use. As I show in the next section, Iraqi leaders gambled that the United States would be reluctant to use nuclear weapons given the various costs and benefits of nuclear strikes in this type of conflict.

IRAQI NUCLEAR VIEWS

The evidence indicates that the Iraqi leadership factored the American nuclear arsenal into their decision making in a manner consistent with my argument. This finding is particularly surprising, because no country had used nuclear weapons for forty-five years, and the United States had refrained from nuclear use in the Korean and Vietnam Wars. Yet the Iraqi leadership frequently referenced US nuclear capabilities and undertook

costly preparations in response. They hoped that they could fight conventionally, were determined not to use their own unconventional weapons first, and thought that by holding those weapons in reserve they could deter nuclear strikes. If that failed, they hedged by implementing various civil and military measures to minimize the impact of nuclear strikes. The reason they discounted early American nuclear use centered primarily on a strategic logic: that such use would be counterproductive to US interests in the current situation.

Iraqi elites discussed the American nuclear arsenal frequently throughout the crisis. Saddam privately informed the Yemeni president in August 1990 that "we considered that America and Israel . . . may attack us by the atomic bombs. . . . We are ready for that."[91] During a January 1991 confidential meeting with Yasser Arafat, the Iraqi president boasted to his guest that they had carefully considered confronting the United States, including the "case of [America] bombarding Baghdad with atomic bombs."[92]

These Iraqi debates explicitly took American cost-benefit considerations on nuclear use into account. In other words, as the military benefits of nuclear use increased, so too would the likelihood of an American nuclear strike. "I know if the going gets hard, then the Americans or the British will use the atomic weapons against me, and so will Israel," Saddam explained.[93] At an October Revolutionary Command Council meeting, Iraqi leaders considered the likelihood and timing of a US attack. During the meeting, Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri, a member of the RCC and Saddam's inner circle, argued that "we must also expect that the United States could hit us with a nuclear bomb, because the United States . . . cannot imagine our situation, cannot fathom how a little country stands in defiance in front of the United States and dares to challenge it and to win." He then added, "It is possible that if the United States hits us and after six or seven months did not get the result and saw that the war is going to start tearing the [American] people apart, it is possible that it will use nuclear bombs to strike two or three cities."[94] That is, the Americans might escalate to nuclear use if US losses (and thus the benefits of ending those losses) increased and the US had not withdrawn after enduring casualties as the Iraqi leaders hoped.

There was an obvious problem with the Iraqi strategy of inflicting casualties on the Americans to force negotiations, then. If the US did not negotiate, nuclear use would become more likely. The Iraqis never fully resolved this problem. Part of the reason they were willing to run such a risk was their belief, discussed earlier, that inaction could result in the end of their regime. But another reason was the nature of the conflict and costs associated with nuclear use.

The Iraqis had not simply resigned themselves to nuclear strikes. A speech draft for Saddam Hussein dated August 12, 1990, focused on

comments by "Samuel Nan" (likely Senator Sam Nunn of Georgia), that the United States would not rule out using "tactical atomic weapons" in response to Iraqi chemical attacks.[95] Though the focus was on tactical nuclear weapons, the document contains insight into Iraqi thinking more broadly on what might constrain US nuclear use.

The document raised three possible reasons the US might not use nuclear weapons. Each centered on the costs of nuclear use for the Americans. The first highlighted a reputational concern consistent with normative nonuse arguments, while the second and third focused on material considerations. First, "international public opinion for today is not the same as it was during the 2nd World War. . . . If America was the one to start using such weapons, they will be dragged down to a lower degree on the ladder of the force centers and international influence." Second, any fighting would "be inside the operation field of one of the biggest oil fields in the world. The pollution would harm the world's economy and ultimately it would cause America an enormous horrifying crisis." Third, "What is more important than these other two factors, is that America knows or at least can realize, that Iraq has weapons that could match their tactical weapons and that Iraq is able to respond to such usage . . . by retaliating against their forces or retaliating against Israel. . . . If Iraq was forced to conduct a self defense against such a massive assault, Iraq will not hesitate to use whatever he has in regards to weapons in order to slam the attack back."[96]

There are a number of reasons to take these arguments seriously. To begin with, the Iraqi leadership spoke of the US interest in petroleum and believed it to be a powerful influence on US policy. They also frequently highlighted the utility of their unconventional weapons. As Benjamin Buch and Scott Sagan report, "Saddam viewed chemical weapons as a final trump card, to be held in reserve to deter American or Israeli use of chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons and to prevent coalition forces from marching on Baghdad."[97] At a December 29, 1990, RCC meeting, Dr. Sa'dun Hammadi counseled that the Iraqi leadership should calm public anxiety by rebroadcasting foreign reports about Iraqi biological weapons to inform "our citizens that we are not fighting the enemy with empty hands but with weapons."[98] Indeed, Iraqi leadership publicly and privately asserted that Iraq would use every weapon in its arsenal in an attempt at deterrence. The targets included Saudi Arabia, Israel, and US forces in the region.[99] To be sure, Saddam recognized that chemical weapons were not equivalent to nuclear weapons.[100] Yet when discussing the American nuclear threat with his military advisers, he noted that "the only things I have are chemical and biological weapons, and I shall have to use them. I have no alternative."[101]

This is not to say that the Iraqis would use the weapons first. While they sought to inflict US casualties, they were hesitant to use every weapon in

their arsenal to do so. At a meeting in November 1990, Aziz cautioned that using chemical weapons "would give them [the Americans] an excuse for a nuclear attack."[102] During the second week of January 1991, Saddam stated that Iraq would use chemical weapons "only in case we are obliged and there is a great necessity to put them into action."[103] After the war, Iraqi officials told the United Nations Monitoring, Verification, and Inspection Commission that "these weapons were only to be used in response to a nuclear attack on Baghdad."[104] Richard Cheney, serving as secretary of defense in 1991, later recalled that the Iraqi military intelligence leader said after the war that Iraqi leaders understood that if they used chemical weapons the "allied troops were certain to use nuclear arms and the price will be too dear and too high."[105] While Cheney attributed this to veiled American threats, Aziz's comments occurred before Secretary of State Baker's implicit warning on January 9, 1991, which suggests that Iraqi leaders had already come to this conclusion independently.[106] This is consistent with the argument advanced in this book that states without nuclear arms will probe and set their own red lines when confronting a nuclear-armed opponent.[107]

Iraq's behavior matched its planning. In mid-January 1991 Saddam informed his advisers that Iraq would soon strike Israel with "conventional missiles." He added, "I mean we will use the other warheads, you know, in return for the warheads they use."[108] On January 8, the commander of Iraq's surface-to-surface missiles, Lieutenant General Hazim Abd al-Razzaq al-Ayyubi, received instructions to use biological and chemical weapons "the moment a pertinent order is given, or in the event of a massive strike against Iraq."[109] Kevin Woods found that Saddam "personally made clear to al-Ayyubi that conventional weapons would be the first response option in case of a Coalition attack. In case this last piece of guidance changed, Saddam dedicated a trusted bodyguard to manage a special code word communication system with its own dedicated radio and phone network to ensure communication with the missile commander."[110]

The conceptualization of the chemical arsenal as a deterrent force becomes more apparent when placed alongside Saddam's decision to delegate authority for burning the Kuwaiti oil fields. While there is some evidence that Saddam provided predesignated launch orders for chemical and biological weapons, discussions of this option centered on a response to nuclear strikes. "Despite the purported predelegation of launch authority for missiles with chemical and biological warheads in the event of a nuclear strike on Baghdad," conclude McCarthy and Tucker, "Saddam Hussein probably retained release authority for the tactical use of these weapons during the Gulf War."[111] By contrast, the Iraqi leadership viewed the smoke from burning oil as a valuable battlefield ally, capable of disrupting

coalition air operations.[112] It was thus not a strategic deterrent. During a January 13 meeting, an aide sought clarification on the scope of the operation:

> Male 1: Sir, concerning the oil installations being prepared to be destroyed, there is an order from Your Excellency to blow up these installations in case of a certain degree of danger, or we can wait for an order from Your Excellency. However, Sir, because al-Wafra is near the [Kuwait / Saudi Arabian] borders, Your Excellency has given the local commander the authority to blow it up whenever he believes there is danger. Now, Al-Burgan and the navy remain. Would they be included according to the situation, or—
>
> Saddam: According to the situation, according to the situation. . . . You could decide this according to the situation in the field of operations—[113]

During the war the oil fields burned; the chemical weapons remained unused.

The Iraqi claim that nuclear weapons had political utility and that their unconventional arsenal could deter nuclear use also matched longer-term thinking and behavior. Throughout the 1980s Iraq had pursued chemical, biological, and nuclear capabilities. In March 1979, Saddam explained that in a hypothetical war with Israel, "we will hear the Americans threatening that if we don't stop our advance, they will throw an atomic bomb at us. Then we can tell them, 'Yes, thank you, we will stop. What do you want?' 'Stop and don't move, not even one meter, otherwise we will throw an atomic bomb on you,' they reply. We will state that we have stopped, but we have not given up."[114] In addition, Iraq recognized the value of an unconventional deterrent against nuclear-armed states. "According to our technical, scientific, and military calculations, [Iraq's chemical and biological weapons are] a sufficient deterrent to confront the Israeli nuclear weapon," Saddam said in July 1990.[115]

The Iraqis also instituted costly military and civil defense procedures to hedge against US nuclear use. This would potentially reduce the effects of nuclear use and thereby the benefits to the United States and (marginally) reduce destruction should all else fail. This provides further corroboration that Iraqi discussions on US nuclear capabilities were not simply idle conversation but had a direct effect on Iraqi behavior.

There is some evidence the US nuclear arsenal influenced Iraqi force disposition. The commander of the Republican Guard, Lieutenant General Aayad Futayyih Khalifa al-Rawi, made special note of potential battlefield nuclear use. He recalled that Iraqi leaders "called in the Chemical and Biological Weapons Commander and requested that he give us a plan to defend against a nuclear and biological attack. [A]s it turned out,

the American forces had within their arsenal [in Saudi Arabia] Pershing missiles which have nuclear warheads. We studied these missiles and their effects carefully and decided on a wide deployment."[116] The United States had already destroyed most of its Pershing missiles at this point in connection with the 1987 US-Soviet Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty, and there is no evidence the US had any nuclear-armed Pershing missiles in the area.[117] The Iraqi focus on dispersing ground forces to reduce nuclear effectiveness was reasonable (if likely unnecessary). Colin Powell recalled that it was difficult to estimate how many tactical nuclear weapons would be necessary to destroy a single Iraqi Republican Guard division because the answer depended on the Iraqi deployment. As Jon Meachem notes, "If the Iraqi troops were thinly spread along a long front, it would require more; if they were more densely massed, it might require fewer."[118]

The Iraqi regime also undertook extensive civil defense preparations to deal with a nuclear attack.[119] For instance, a Ministry of the Interior memo described the purpose of the High Committee for the Evacuation of Baghdad as "preparing an evacuation plan for the city of Baghdad in the event that nuclear weapons are used suddenly." During a series of meetings from October 17 to October 20, 1990, the committee explicitly considered "the impact of a 20-kiloton nuclear bomb on the city of Baghdad."[120] On December 21, there was a large-scale evacuation drill in Saddam City (Sadr City), a suburb of Baghdad.[121]

This planning was not done to enhance Iraqi morale. Indeed, top officials began to worry that the information was damaging the Iraqi will to resist. For instance, at an RCC meeting on December 29, Ali Hassan al-Majid raised the issue of "what is happening in Baghdad with regard to civil defense awareness. There is an explanation about the effects of atomic, nuclear bombs, its efficacy, what does it do, how many people will it kill and how many people will it decimate. All of this awareness is frightening people and instilling fear. . . . We do not have to do that; we only have to provide awareness about preventive measures of such bombs."[122] Izzat al-Duri agreed: "We do not have to explain what the bomb will do; we do not have to explain what the effects of chemical weapons are . . . we can explain only the preventive measures."[123] After criticizing his lieutenants for harming morale, Saddam pushed for a simpler option. "We should decide on the evacuation plan and tell them that every citizen should befriend a rural citizen, just in case the war expands and we are forced to evacuate. We should not explain to the citizen what the atomic bomb will do."[124]

Iraqi elites were not alone in thinking that the United States was capable of nuclear attacks. After one particularly large explosion on January 28, 1991, both the Soviet and the Israeli governments contacted the United States to ask if the Americans had detonated a nuclear weapon. A few days

later another large explosion prompted a British soldier to announce on the open radio that "the blokes have just nuked Kuwait."[125] If allies and neutral parties could conceive of the United States using nuclear weapons in the dispute, it is not surprising that Iraqi leaders in a direct adversarial role did the same. Moreover, as noted earlier, US officials as senior as the secretary of defense inquired privately about nuclear options.

Iraqi behavior is congruent with my argument. In an intense political dispute, Iraqi leadership took actions they believed would fall below the threshold of nuclear use. Most of the limitations that Iraq exhibited were due to its own weakness; it could do little more. For Iraq as a weak actor, war with the United States was possible precisely because it would pose such a low danger to the United States. Even then, Iraqi leadership incorporated the US nuclear arsenal into their decision making in 1990–1991. That confrontation is the most important to examine because it involved Iraqi military action that Iraqi leaders believed would invite some form of US response, and US compellent demands did not center on Iraqi regime change. In 1990, Saddam and his lieutenants held their own unconventional weapons in reserve and discounted an American nuclear strike because of the high strategic costs that such a strike would impose on the United States. They also undertook various civil defense measures to minimize losses from nuclear strikes. Fortunately, the Americans had little intention of using nuclear weapons and did not face a need to resort to nuclear use.