1 Regional Politics and the Conflict
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INTRODUCTION

The causes of wars are multiple. They can be studied on several levels, the personal and domestic, the regional interactions and on the grand tableau of international, or more accurately global, politics. Whether the causes of wars are sought in man, the state or the configuration of the state-system at a particular time, there is still another a dimension to consider. What A.J.P. Taylor distinguished as the profound versus the particular causes need to be unravelled, for most conflicts have underlying as well as proximate causes. Case-studies tell us something about the causes of particular wars but not necessarily much about wars in general.

Attempts to analyse the relationship of one level of interactions and the origins of war are bound to be partial and incomplete. They must be linked to analyses on other levels if the entire picture is to be recreated. In the particular case of Saddam Hussein's Iraq, one is naturally drawn to the individual level, for in highly personalized systems individual leaders play a disproportionately important role in decision-making, unconstrained by checks and balances, institutions or groups. All too easily the individual's perceptions, priorities, self-interest and survival are melded into and confused with those of the collectivity. The psychology of Saddam, arch-conspirator and latterly unrivalled leader, as well as the political system he fashioned, are thus important sources for explaining the origins of the second Gulf War. Yet since the domestic system exercised few checks on Saddam's behaviour, the importance of the regional dimension becomes magnified. The tyrant who is unconstrained at home must be subject to countervailing power regionally if he is not to run rampant there in much the same manner as at home.

Another level of analysis, the global dimension of international politics, is also a very important part of the explanation for Saddam's actions. We cannot dwell on this in this chapter but there is little doubt
that changes in relations between the superpowers, the end of the Cold War and the virtual withdrawal of the USSR from a policy competitive with the United States in the Middle East caused Saddam considerable alarm. As he indicated in February 1990 at Amman, a world with only one superpower not only reduced Iraq's leverage, but could also pose a threat to Arab interests in the region, especially if the US were to continue to support Israel's interests as assiduously as it had in the past. On this interpretation, an imminent major shift at the global level threatened Iraq with a more uncongenial - if not adverse - environment for the pursuit of its interests. The practical implication of the transitional period was to move quickly while there was still time, rather than later when conditions could be more hostile.

Our focus in this chapter is on neither the personal nor the global but on the regional determinants or antecedents of the war. To what extent and in what ways did regional politics encourage, discourage or otherwise affect Saddam Hussein's decision to resort to force in August 1990? What influence did the shape and tenor of regional politics have on the decision to act? How did they affect the action itself and shape its consequences?

One may see the regional environment as a permissive, constraining, or neutral factor. It can be a medium facilitating, or conducive to, the exercise of force, or an arena making the exercise of force difficult, dangerous and unrewarding. It can also be a terrain which is neutral; having no strong bearing on the decision to use force, on the exercise of that force or on its consequences. To the extent that the regional environment - regional politics and the balance or imbalance of power - encouraged or otherwise facilitated the extension of Iraq's claim to Kuwait, by erecting no obstacles and furnishing no blocking alignments or local disincentives, we can say that in this instance the regional environment was permissive.

It may even have encouraged Iraq's claim in the sense that it furnished no warnings, provided no barriers to it. Saddam Hussein purported to see the issue of Iraq's claim to Kuwait as a regional one, a family affair, concerning only Arabs, and sought to keep it that way and dealt with 'in-house'. The justifications offered were dressed up primly in regional values. It may be that Saddam really thought the issue was regional, concerning no one other than the local - Arab - states. If so his reading of the regional environment takes on even greater weight.

The external environment was not the motivating cause - which was domestic - but provided the context within which Iraqi policy had to act. It was the conditioning element in the failure or success of the seizure of Kuwait. Insofar as it was a facilitating factor, that is a milieu ostensibly