This chapter starts with the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq on 2 August 1990 which led to a coalition facing Iraq and using ‘all necessary means’ in accordance with SCR 678 (1990) first to wage the air war and then the ground war which was followed by the cease-fire SCR 687 (1991) adopted on 3 April 1991. It then examines the work of the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) on Iraq established by SCR 687 (1991) during the decade from 1991 to 2000. Unsurprisingly, the chapter draws from my earlier book, The UNSCOM Saga, which examined UNSCOM in some detail.

The invasion of Kuwait by Iraq

The territorial dispute between Iraq and Kuwait, like that between Iraq and Iran, had its origins in the history of the region during the Ottoman Empire. Between February and July 1990 Iraq advanced several political, territorial and financial claims against Kuwait and then, in the latter part of July, Iraq deployed military forces along its border with Kuwait. On 2 August at 1.00 am local time, Iraqi troops crossed the international frontier and began their invasion and occupation of Kuwait.

Although the international community was not expecting such an invasion, within hours of the initial reports of Iraq’s invasion, the Security Council convened and unanimously adopted SCR 660 (1990) condemning the invasion, and demanding that Iraq immediately and unconditionally withdraw all its forces. Each of the P5 voiced strong opposition to the invasion and stressed the need for negotiation. Four days later, SCR 661 (1990) imposed comprehensive mandatory sanctions on Iraq except for medical supplies and, in humanitarian circumstances, foodstuffs. These sanctions required all states to prevent import into their countries of all commodities and products originating in Iraq or Kuwait and to prevent the supply of any commodities or products other than the exceptions mentioned above.
When Iraq showed no intention to withdraw from Kuwait or otherwise comply with SCR 660 (1990) and 661 (1990), further resolutions were adopted. This included in November 1990 the adoption of SCR 678 (1990) which contained an ultimatum for Iraq. In its first paragraph the Council decided to allow Iraq ‘one final opportunity, as a cause of goodwill’ to fully implement on or before 15 January 1991 SCR 660 (1990) and all subsequent resolutions. Should Iraq fail to do so the Council said in the second paragraph, the Member States cooperating with the government of Kuwait were authorized ‘to use all necessary means’ – words understood to mean military force – to uphold and implement the resolutions and to ‘restore international peace and security in the area’. This was only the fourth time in the United Nations history that the Security Council had decided to authorize Member States to use military force – the previous occasions had been in 1950 in relation to the Korean situation, in 1966 when the UK was authorized to intercept tankers carrying oil to Southern Rhodesia and in 1990 in the authorization of measures to enforce the sanctions imposed on Iraq in SCR 665 (1990).

The 45 day period between the adoption of SCR 678 (1990) and the deadline for Iraqi compliance saw a number of initiatives aimed at averting an outbreak of war. On 9 January 1991, the US Secretary of State, James Baker, and Iraq’s Deputy Prime Minister, Tariq Aziz, held six hours of talks in Geneva. The meeting did not make any headway and the subsequent mission by the UN Secretary-General, Javier Pérez de Cuéllar to Iraq in the days that followed was carried out amid dim prospects for a diplomatic breakthrough. Meeting with Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz on 12 January and with President Saddam Hussein on 13 January 1991, Javier Pérez de Cuéllar urged full compliance with the relevant Security Council Resolutions. President Hussein reiterated his country’s positions on various issues, including its claims to Kuwait and its call for an Arab solution to the crisis and reaffirmed the linkage Iraq had made between the Iraq–Kuwait situation and other Middle East questions such as the Arab–Israeli conflict and the Palestinian issues. Returning to New York just before the 15 January deadline, Javier Pérez de Cuéllar stated that the talks in Iraq had been polite but unfortunately unsuccessful.

On 15 January 1991, the international coalition under the leadership of President George H. W. Bush of the United States had amassed approximately 680,000 troops in the Gulf of which some 410,000 were from the US. Estimates of the number of Iraqi troops in occupied Kuwait ranged from 300,000 to 600,000. In a statement that day, Javier Pérez de Cuéllar noted that the ‘world stands poised between peace and war’ and he appealed to President Hussein ‘to turn the course of events away from catastrophe and towards a new era of justice and harmony based on the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.’ The Secretary-General also said that if Iraq signified its readiness to comply with the Security Council