Title
The Gulf Crisis and Its Implications for Africa

Journal
Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 18(2)

ISSN
0041-5715

Author
Muaka, Angaluki

Publication Date
1990

DOI
10.5070/F7182016828

The Gulf Crisis and Its Implications for Africa

by
Angaluki Muaka

[Editor's note: This paper was originally presented at a U.C.L.A. African Activist Association meeting in October 1990, before the Gulf War took place. As most of the points in this paper are still valid concerns, we have decided to publish it in its original form.]

Introduction

Considering various old cities and provinces, Iraq's history dates back to earlier than 650 B. C. Modern Iraq, however, was created from the Ottoman provinces of Baghdad, Basra, and Mosul, and emerged from British colonial rule as an independent state in 1932. Kuwait, on the other hand, was carved by Britain from Basra, then a province under the Turks, as a sheikhdom under British protection in 1899. Iraq has contested the independence of Kuwait since. Kuwait regained her independence from Britain as a modern state in 1961. Her discovery and subsequent production of oil from 1946[1] made sure that Iraq would not completely give up its claims over the emirate. It is no wonder, therefore, that Iraq, accusing Kuwait of illegally drilling its oil and overproducing it, thus pushing down oil prices on the world market, overran Kuwait on August 2, 1990. With its interests in the region threatened and desirous on keeping Iraqi military capability within palatable limits, the United States moved a large contingent of troops into Saudi Arabia in readiness to take on Iraq should the need arise. The ambition of Iraq's President Saddam Hussein to dominate the Persian Gulf has made him refuse to pull out of Kuwait and he is quite willing to go to war should anyone try to get him out by force. The crisis created by this standoff between the U. S. and Iraqi forces, though now the war is over, has major implications for Africa and, indeed, the whole world.

Implications

The implications of the Gulf crisis for Africa can broadly be divided into four categories: military, political, cultural, and economic.

Military Implications

Since the crisis primarily involves Arab countries, it would have been expected that the part of Africa to be militarily affected would be the Arab north. Indeed, Egypt and Morocco have sent their soldiers to Saudi Arabia to reinforce the U. S. troops and those from other countries already there. Iraq, therefore, sees Egypt and Morocco as fellow Arab countries ready to go to war with it and has to devise methods for fighting back. Western Sahara's Polisario guerrilla movement provides one option of fighting back Morocco. That is, Iraq could provide military support to Polisario, which would then be able to keep Morocco busy longer than Morocco would like to see. As for Egypt, the crisis only makes its rivalry with Iraq for Arab leadership potentially more explosive.

Iraq has been on fairly good terms with the Sudan, especially under the present president, Lt. General Omar Hassan el-Bashir's military regime. El-Bashir has, therefore, readily allowed Saddam Hussein to station his troops and mount missiles on his land across the Red Sea from Saudi Arabia. In the event of war breaking out between Iraq and the U. S. in which Iraq decides to deploy the missiles stationed in the Sudan, Omar el-Bashir has exposed his country to U. S. air raids that he is ill-prepared to stand up to. Secondly, this means that el-Bashir will receive heavy supplies of ammunition from Iraq with which to fight John Garang's Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), currently engaged in a civil war with the Khartoum government. And to punish el-Bashir for sympathizing with Iraq in the crisis, the U. S. would supply the SPLA with deadly weaponry to help them in their fight against the Khartoum government. Depending on how the U. S. views el-Bashir's government, this could mark the beginning of an increased and more active U. S. military presence in southern Sudan. This would only help protract the civil war in which exhaustion on the part of government forces had seen the government coming to negotiating tables with SPLA on a number of occasions, albeit without fruitful results. With its newly acquired military strength Sudan can confidently carry the battle beyond its frontiers into those countries it has been accusing of aiding and abetting the SPLA. And should Saddam Hussein convince el-Bashir about the sense in using chemical weapons, then neighboring countries that have had border skirmishes with the Sudan in the past would be in for a pretty unpleasant military experience.

Ethiopia, however, is already feeling the effect of the crisis from a different angle. Eritrea's Muslim Arab identity has attracted military support for the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) from Iraq.[2] When the EPLF was gaining ground against Ethiopian government

forces earlier on in the year, Israel saw the danger in an Iraqi victory in the region and quickly came to Ethiopia's rescue. The current crisis only makes such Israeli support for Ethiopia all the more justified. With Israeli and, therefore, U. S. assistance, the Ethiopia/Eritrea war, which everyone would have liked to see ended, has been given a new lease on life.

Whichever way we look at it, therefore, the Gulf crisis means that the whole region from North Africa, the Horn down to Kenya has entered a new stage of high level militarization, exposing it to potential major destruction in the event of the situation getting out of control. Besides, we also see that lines between military alliances in the region have been clearly drawn and emphasized. The Sudan, a longtime supporter of the EPLF against the Addis Ababa government, is now receiving military supplies from Iraq, which is also currently helping arm the EPLF. Ethiopia, which plays host to the SPLA and supports it against the government in Khartoum, has a long-standing defense pact with Kenya, which has also been accused by the Sudan in the past of supporting the SPLA against it. With the two axes, Eritrea-Iraq-Sudan and Ethiopia-Kenya-SPLA, set up, the region is left militarily vulnerable.

Political Implications

The political implications of the crisis for Africa more or less follow the same line as the military ones, with an emphasis on a drastic shift in alliances in some cases, and dilemma and contradiction in others. The U. S./Soviet Union partnership in the crisis means that the traditional African allies of the Soviet Union might as well start preparing for a political future without the U. S. S. R. Ethiopia has already broken tradition by opening its doors to the U. S. in the form of Israel. In turn this prepares Ethiopia for uncomfortable relations with most Arab countries. Sudan's decision to cast its lot with Saddam Hussein, who is opposed by Egypt and Morocco, means a major shift in relations between the Sudan and Egypt, longtime friends who once contemplated federation.

One political movement that will be directly affected by the crisis and be left in a dilemma is the Muslim Brotherhood, which has a very heavy presence in the dominantly Muslim North African countries. Saudi Arabia, the traditional sponsor of the Muslim Brotherhood in other countries, will be constrained to withdraw its support for the movement in the countries that support Iraq in the crisis. Besides, the sympathies of the general public in most North African countries lie with Iraq, traditionally considered a foe by the Muslim Brotherhood for Saddam Hussein's opposition to Muslim traditionalism and support for military regimes. This will, therefore, help bridge the gap between the

Brotherhood and the authorities in their countries and, combined with the withdrawal of Saudi support, drastically reduce the influence of the Brotherhood, especially in Algeria, Sudan, and Tunisia where they were headed for political dominance. Even in the case of Egypt, Saudi Arabia would inevitably have to reconsider its support for the Muslim Brothers who have been a source of concern for President Hosni Mubarak, now standing by Saudi Arabia against Iraq. In short, the Muslim Brotherhood in North African countries will be severely weakened by the withdrawal of Saudi support because of the different positions taken by their countries in the crisis.

Religious and cultural "conservatism" in Saudi Arabia will require the U. S. to look elsewhere for alternative places where its soldiers could go on break. Somalia and Kenya already host important U. S. military bases. The activation of such bases, whether for active military operations or mere relaxation for U. S. troops in the Gulf, will necessarily correspond to activation of warm relations with those governments. Having been very vocal in the agitation for democratic reform in most African countries, now the U. S. cannot afford to continue antagonizing the authorities in those countries any more, especially in this time of need. The leaders in such countries will then feel a new confidence to crack down on agitators for democracy and, with the U. S. silent, deal a major blow to the movement for democracy in Africa.

The only political beneficiary of the crisis is Libya, thanks to Muammar Qadhafi's silence over the conflict. In the eyes of the U. S. and the West in general, Saddam Hussein has overtaken him as the worst terrorist, and the U. S. can forgive him for having supported Iran in the Iran/Iraq war.

The most important long-term political development from this crisis, however, will be the free hand the U. S. will have in future African politics. The previously antagonistic U. S./Soviet interests in the continent had helped provide a kind of safety valve for individual countries as either superpower moved in with support and willingness to compromise in an effort to forestall the other. It is precisely for this reason that the Soviet Union-backed Marxist government of Angola has survived the onslaught of the U. S.-backed National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) forces, that the Ethiopian regime has continued in power with Soviet support, and President Mobutu Sese Seko has remained in power in Zaire with U. S. support in spite of his mismanagement of the government. With the virtual disappearance of the Soviet Union from the continent, following the warming up of relations between the two superpowers, a development that has been strengthened and speeded up by their partnership in the Gulf crisis, the U. S. will now freely set the political tune in most of the continent, including hiring and firing of leaderships. One wonders, for instance, if

the world would be witnessing the current Gulf crisis if the past mutual suspicion between the two superpowers had continued uninterrupted. The previous U. S./Soviet rivalry on the continent had also allowed African countries room to state their terms of "cooperation" when dealing with either superpower. Since the uninhibited U. S. involvement in the continent, like anywhere else, will strictly be in U.S. interests, there is no guarantee that such involvement will be to the benefit and, therefore, satisfaction of the African people. African governments will have very little choice of terms and should expect to see from the U. S. more of the spirit that has become the trademark of its policy in the current crisis: "Take it or leave it," "Do it by midday tomorrow or face the consequences!"

Cultural Implications

On the cultural front, Egypt, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates jointly fund the African Islamic Center in Khartoum, Sudan. The Center is crucial to the Arab Muslim countries as a vehicle for the propagation and spread of Islam in African countries. The current crisis, however, has set the Center's host country, the Sudan, which is supporting Iraq, against two of the other funding countries—Kuwait and Saudi Arabia—which are supported by yet another funding country, Egypt. Under the circumstances, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia would be quite willing to withdraw their financial support to the Center with the result that the Center would face imminent closure and, in the process, the Sudan would lose the foreign exchange it earned through donations to the Center; many Sudanese working for the Center would lose their jobs, and the spread of Islam in Africa, the desire of all African Muslims, would be seriously curtailed. The same can be said of the Center's outlets in Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania, and Uganda, all of which depend on funding from other Muslim countries through the Center.

Saudi Arabia, where the forces lined up against Iraq are stationed, houses the two most important cities of the Islamic faith—Mecca and Medina. African countries with heavy Muslim populations like Chad, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Somalia, and Tanzania, among others, regard these cities as the spiritual property of all Muslims and the annual pilgrimage (*al-Hajj*) to Mecca their right. The presence of foreign troops in Saudi Arabia, therefore, will be viewed by these countries as an insult to the sanctity of these cities and an affront to Islam and Muslims in general, and this could very well shape their future relations with Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the other countries who have sent their troops to the Gulf.

The heavy presence of foreign troops in Saudi Arabia is a major threat to the cultural values of neighboring African countries. As

mentioned earlier, U. S. military bases along the East African coast will witness increased military activity in the few days ahead. The dominantly Muslim coastal communities can expect an increased abuse of their cultural values as a result of the assertion of Western military values, such as the consumption of alcohol, prostitution, drugs, and indecent exposure, among others. In Saudi Arabia itself, the U. S. Marines have not hesitated to criticize their hosts for cultural "conservatism" because of the prohibition of alcohol and veiling of their daughters.

Economic Implications

This is the area in which most trouble is expected for African countries. However, any economic problems or benefits from the crisis for African countries will be mostly indirect. Only Egypt expects to benefit directly, by having its debt to the U. S. forgiven for sending its troops to the Gulf to join the U. S. forces there. Morocco may well use its support for the U. S.-led allied forces as its trump card in its quest for membership to the European Economic Community. African oil-producing countries like Algeria, Angola, Egypt, Gabon, Libya, and Nigeria, among others, can also hope to benefit from sky-rocketing oil prices.

More than 13 African countries are established oil producers. Most others depend on oil imports from countries other than Kuwait and Iraq whose oil now faces an embargo from the United Nations Organization. For instance, Burundi has been importing its oil mainly from Iran since 1986; Uganda gets its supplies from Libya by barter trade; Cape Verde mainly relies on Angola for its supplies; by 1986, Madagascar was importing 100% of its oil from the Soviet Union; and Sierrra Leone gets its oil from Nigeria at discount rates. Even Zimbabwe, a former importer of Kuwaiti oil, was, by mid-1986, considering alternative suppliers due to the high rate of Kuwaiti deliveries.[3] Other countries, notably Botswana, are relying less and less on oil as they explore alternative sources of energy like coal. In 1986, Botswana's oil imports dropped by half compared to the amount it imported in 1985.[4] But there is still a small number of African countries which depend on direct imports from Kuwait (e. g. Seychelles)[5] and Iraq.

Ordinarily, the above factors together with the increased production of oil by other members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) should ensure that most African countries do not suffer undue economic hardship as a result of the absence of Iraqi and Kuwaiti oil occasioned by the Gulf crisis. Unfortunately, the other countries which rely on Iraq and Kuwait for their oil imports will

be competing with African oil importers for the same oil available from other exporters. There is also the factor of panic-buying since no one can quite predict what will befall the international oil market by the time the U. S. forces decide to leave the Gulf. This has, therefore, caused the oil prices to sky-rocket, hitting the $39-a-barrel mark[6] with no sign of relenting. In this kind of situation, African oil importers tend to be hit hardest. High oil prices will put the balance of payments of oil importing African countries in jeopardy; they will mean high manufacturing and service costs, endangering of jobs and deterioration of general human welfare. Kenya, for example, has already experienced a 30-40% increase in oil prices, which temporarily threw the country's transport industry into chaos and sent shock waves through its entire economy.[7] The few African countries struggling to begin industrialization like Kenya and Zimbabwe would be hampered and considerably slowed in their efforts.

Kuwait and Saudi Arabia are the leading Arab aid donors to African countries.[8] Kuwait's having fallen under Iraqi occupation, and Saudi resources being taken up by preparation for defence against an imagined Iraqi attack and maintenance of the allied troops in the Gulf, will adversely affect their aid to aid-dependent Africa. An outbreak of war in the Gulf would then mean dire destruction of Gulf oil fields, plunging African countries into untold misery. Indeed, for aid-dependent Africa, the suffering of the U. S. economy alone is enough to paralyze its own economies. Writing in the August 3, 1990 issue of ***USA Today***, Mark Memmot said, "With one swift thrust through Kuwait's rich oil fields, Iraq has shaken the world's economies and could push the U. S. A. into its first recession in eight years."[9] If he were writing for Africa, he would probably have said, "With one swift thrust through Kuwait's rich oil fields, Iraq has shaken the U. S. A. economy, which could push Africa into economic oblivion."

Conclusion

The current Gulf crisis is quite ominous for most African countries, and the best that can happen for them is for the conflict to be resolved peacefully. African countries, however, should brace for disaster, because whether war breaks out or not the world economic order will really never be the same again. The glimmer of hope for global peace and security that the post-cold war era was expected to usher in has just been shattered, confirming that it is not yet time to abandon arms manufacturing as had been envisaged. In fact, the Kuwaiti experience at the hands of its militarily stronger neighbor and the very magnitude of the horror posed by a potential armed conflict in the Gulf means a need for increased national security. This would mean

increased expenditure on the national security of most countries, a trend that will drastically affect other aspects of national budgets. For Arab donor countries, this would mean less aid to foreign dependent governments. For African governments, this would mean less spending on public services, rising cost of living for the general public, and slowed economic growth.

The crisis has just underscored the vulnerability of Gulf oil as the world's main source of energy. Consequently, either oil prices will maintain an upward trend, thus straining most African national economies, or research efforts will have to be put into the search for alternative sources of energy with unpredictable costs.

Countries paying for the cost of maintaining the allied forces in the Gulf will need to look for ways of recouping their costs. Since most of these countries are the main lenders to African countries, it can be expected that their lending will fall drastically and interest rates on their loans will rise. Already overburdened with loans, African economies will continue to suffer. Besides, emerging East European democracies are providing more attractive investment prospects for the West, and African economies will not be spared by the competition posed by these new democracies.

Among the most important lessons that African countries should learn form the Gulf conflict are the need to look for alternative sources of energy and reduce their overdependence on imported oil; the need to wisely and, indeed, patriotically harness their own resources, drastically reduce dependence on foreign "aid" and learn to be economically self-reliant; the necessity to be politically independent in order to implement positive political reform on their own initiative without waiting to be prompted by hypocritical foreign powers whose involvement in Africa is primarily to serve their own interest; and, finally, the urgency to rethink their military involvement with other countries, a situation that only helps expose the continent to the risk of military destruction in wars that only serve the interests of such other countries.

Notes

[1]T. Mostyn and A. Hourani (eds.), ***The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the Middle East and North Africa*** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1988), p. 366.

[2]***Africa Confidential***, Vol. 31, No. 17, 24 August, 1990.

[3]See ***African Quarterly Energy Review***, No. 4, 1987 for suppliers of some African oil-importing countries.

[4]***Ibid.***, p. 24.

[5]***Ibid.***, p. 123.

[6]***The Times*** (London), September 28, 1990.

[7]***The Weekly Review*** (Nairobi), September 14, 1990.
[8]Arye Oded, ***African and the Middle East Conflict*** (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1987).
[9]***USA Today*** (Arlington), August 3, 1990.

Additional Sources

Abu Osba, Saleh. ***Afro-Arab Centricity: A Model for Development Communication***. (Ottawa: Jerusalem International Publishing House, 1982).
Beshir, Mohamed Omar. ***Terramedia: Themes in Afro-Arab Relations***. (London: Ithaca Press, 1982).
Haseeb, Khair el-Din (ed.). ***The Arabs and Africa***. (London and Beirut: Croom Helm and Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 1985).
Le Vine, Victor and Timothy Luke. ***The Arab-African Connection: Political and Economic Realities***. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1979).

THE GREEDY EAT WITH BOTH HANDS

* * * * *

LEADERS WHO LEAD FROM CLOSED DOORS
OFTEN SUFFER SURPRISES

* * * * *

THE CHAIR THAT IS TILTED MEANS THAT IT WAS
ONCE OWNED BY A WEALTHY MAN

* * * * *

THE CHOICEST FRUIT FAVORS
THOSE WHO HAVE A LADDER

supplied by Mazisi Kunene