

The U.S. Foreign Policy and Jordan: The George H. W. Bush Presidency 1989-1993

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Abstract

Drawing on a substantial political science literature, this paper explores the United States' foreign policy toward Jordan and describes the dramatic policy shift that occurred in the years of George H. W. Bush's presidency (1989-1993) in response to the Iraqi-Kuwaiti crisis. The analysis of the events of the time reveal that as a result of various interrelated political actions, the relationship between the two nations was changed. Although temporarily disrupted, as a result of the peace process, the two nations were ultimately re-established as supportive, and Jordan played a key role in the Madrid conference for peace in the Middle East.

Keywords: foreign policy, Iraqi-Kuwaiti crisis, George H. W. Bush presidency, Jordan, United States.

1. Introduction

The foreign policy of the United States toward Jordan has been shaped since the early years of the Cold War. On January 31, 1949, the United States established its diplomatic relations with the newly independent Kingdom. Since that time, the United States has appreciated the distinctive role of the Jordanian leadership in advancing peace and promoting democracy, as well as modernization in the Middle East region. Furthermore, the United States and Jordan share mutual visions, objectives, and interests toward achieving just, comprehensive, and lasting peace in the region. In April 1957, the White House declared "the independence and integrity of Jordan as vital," (Nyrop, 1980, p. 32) to the United States. Immediately, the Eisenhower administration provided Jordan with \$10 million of emergency financial aid, military assistance, and diplomatic support to ensure sustainability of Jordan and its regime.

2. The George H. W. Bush Presidency: 1989-1993

On January 20, 1989, George H. W. Bush was inaugurated as the forty-first President of the United States. The Republican President previously served as the United States House of Representative from Texas, United States Ambassador to the United Nations, Chairman of the Republican National Committee, Chief of the United States Liaison Office to China, Director of Central Intelligence, and Vice President from 1981-1989 under President Reagan. Following his inauguration, President Bush spent a large part of his efforts on foreign affairs ("George H. W. Bush: Foreign Affairs," n.d.). The years of Bush's presidency witnessed dramatic changes in world affairs. The most prominent world events that took place during Bush's term in office included Panama, the ending of the Cold War, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the reunification of Germany with Eastern Europe, the break of the Gulf War, the formation of an unprecedented military coalition of 32 nations to liberate Kuwait, the reduction of the threat of nuclear war, the replacement of the Soviet Union with a democratic Russia, the Baltic states became free, US-Soviet relations changed, the New World Order was announced, the world system transformed from bipolar to unipolar, and the United States became the world's sole economic, military, and political superpower ("Biography: George Herbert Walker Bush," n.d.).

3. The Political Arena

Following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, King Hussein immediately placed a phone call to President Saddam Hussein of Iraq in an initial attempt to reach a settlement to resolve the Iraqi-Kuwaiti crisis. Saddam assured the King that if the Arab states were tolerant to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, he would endeavor to begin a gradual recall of troops and complete his pullout of the emirate within weeks. After speaking with Saddam, the King met with the Egyptian President, Hosni Mubarak, to convene a mini-summit of the Egyptian, Iraqi, Jordanian, Kuwaiti, and Saudi leaders to resolve the Iraqi-Kuwaiti crisis. In the meantime, both the King and President Mubarak spoke by phone to American President Bush, who regarded the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait as totally unacceptable and voiced his opposition. They asked that he delay any American action and to allow the Arabs time to resolve the crisis within the Arab League. Further, they told Bush that it was just a matter of days that Saddam Hussein would withdraw his military troops from Kuwait (Ashton, 2008).

On August 3, 1990, King Hussein met with Saddam Hussein in Baghdad. In that meeting the King ensured two objectives: first, he persuaded Saddam to participate in a mini-summit in Jeddah on August 5. Second, he convinced Saddam to withdraw his military troops from Kuwait within hours if the Arab League did not put down the Iraqi invasion. The last point was deemed important for Saddam because any direct censure of Saddam by the Arab League would create a sense of embarrassment for him. This condemnation could change the perception of withdrawal to that of a humiliating defeat. The King believed he had successfully advanced the goal of containing the crisis. Unfortunately, although the King's diplomacy was to some extent successful, it was undermined when the Egyptian government first, and later the Arab League Foreign Ministers who met on August 3 in Cairo and unexpectedly condemned the Iraqi invasion. Marwan Al-Qassim, the Jordanian Foreign Minister and Representative to the Arab League meeting of Foreign Ministers in Cairo, abstained from voting due to his concern that this would be promoting intervention by outside parties. Jordanian officials were suspicious of the United States, convincing Egypt and Saudi Arabia to relinquish hope of a negotiating a permanent solution. Following the adoption of a resolution condemning the Iraqi invasion, Saddam abandoned any plans for withdrawal, whether real or otherwise, and refused to attend the Arab Summit in Jeddah (Ashton, 2008).

The Egyptian President called an emergency Arab Summit, to be convened in Cairo on August 10th, to discuss the ongoing Iraqi-Kuwaiti crisis. The Jordanian King participated in the summit in an attempt to bring about a peaceful solution. As a result of this summit, the Arab League officially adopted a resolution (Resolution 195) condemning the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. It further called for immediate and unconditional withdrawal of the Iraqi forces from Kuwait, reasserted Kuwait's sovereignty, and additionally responded to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states' requests to shift Arab forces to defend Saudi Arabia and the regional security of the Gulf states. Jordan and some other Arab states abstained from the vote (White Paper, 1991). The Jordanian neutral position was interpreted as an expression of sympathy for Saddam Hussein from both the Arab states, especially the Gulf states, and also the United States. The Arab League "Resolution 195" adopted at the Extraordinary Arab Summit in Cairo on August 10, 1990, decided the following:

... (3) To condemn Iraqi aggression against the brotherly state of Kuwait and not to recognise the Iraqi decision to annex Kuwait or any consequences arising from the invasion of Iraqi troops of Kuwait territory. (4) To call for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of the Iraqi troops from Kuwait and the return to the state it was in before 1 August. (5) To reaffirm Kuwait sovereignty, its independence and regional security ... (6) To respond to Saudi Arabia's and other Gulf States' request to transfer Arab forces to support their armed forces to defend their territories and regional security against any outside invasion (White Paper, 1991, pp. 23-24).

After the Arab League adopted a resolution condemning the Iraqi invasion, Jordan found itself isolated from the majority of the Arab states. Subsequently, on August 16, 1990, King Hussein met with President Bush in Kennebunkport, Maine to discuss the ongoing Iraqi-Kuwaiti crisis. The King tried to persuade Bush to keep the crisis within the Arab framework, find a diplomatic solution to the entire crisis, and avoid the military option. Ultimately, the King's attempt to convince Bush and his administration to reach a peaceful settlement was unsuccessful. Furthermore, American officials argued that the King was defending Saddam Hussein.

In his memoirs, Bush recorded that the King “pressed for some middle ground that could solve the problem, and I kept saying, there isn’t any – it’s got to be withdrawal and restoration of the Kuwaiti regime.” (Ashton, 2008, p. 271). The meeting damaged relations between the two nations and displayed how far apart the United States and Jordan’s policies were from each other at that time. The Bush administration was disappointed with the King’s position and tension between the two countries grew. In the months following the crisis, the Jordanian King continued to persuade all the parties involved in the Iraqi-Kuwaiti crisis to find a diplomatic resolution to the crisis within the Arab framework instead of war. While King Hussein played a significant role in the Iraq-Iran War of 1980-1988 as a mediator between the Iraqi government and the United States, the King’s efforts to resolve the Iraqi-Kuwait crisis reached a dead end. His prior efforts were completely forgotten and crucially undermined during the Iraqi invasion. Jordanian efforts to stop the war were effectively rejected by both Arabs and Americans.

As the internationally-led airstrike campaign against Iraq started, the Jordanian government expressed more sympathy for the Iraqi people. On February 6, 1991, King Hussein delivered a firm speech to his nation that was brought about by the death of Jordanian truck drivers by an American airstrike while on the Baghdad-Amman highway. In his speech, the King sharply denounced the United States and its allies’ war against Iraq, declaring that the allied war effort was “against all Arabs and all Muslims and not against Iraq alone.” (Cowell, 1991). Further, he indicated that the allied forces were seeking to exercise a foreign hegemony in the Middle East, stating that the Western alliance intention was to “destroy Iraq and reorganize the area in a manner far more dangerous to our people than the Sykes-Picot agreement.” (Cowell, 1991). Disappointed, the United States responded to this speech by suspending aid to Jordan and promising to review plans for future aid (Garfinkle, 1993). In addition, Secretary of State, James A. Baker III told *The Washington Post*, “Although the United States ‘fundamentally disagrees’ with King Hussein of Jordan’s harsh criticism of the war against Iraq, alternatives to Hussein are not ‘particularly pretty’ and it is important to keep communications with the king open.” (Goshko, 1991).

Three days later, President Bush swiftly sent a personal, harsh letter to King Hussein articulating his dissatisfaction:

I am not going to hide my deep disappointment with your speech of February 6. I had not expected ... to read such a vitriolic attack on the intensions and actions of the multinational coalition that is liberating Kuwait ... your words exculpate Saddam Hussein for the most serious and most brazen crime against the Arab nation by another Arab in modern times ... If we do not agree on these matters, so be it. But we must understand that a public, political posture that takes Jordan so far from the international and Arab consensus has damaged very seriously the prospects for eliciting international help for Jordan. If I am circumspect in my own public views on your accusations, it is only because I continue to place value, however unrequited, in your nation’s well-being and stability (‘George H. W. Bush,’ quoted in Ashton, 2008, p. 280).

4. The Economic Arena

The Gulf crisis of 1990-1991 negatively impacted the Jordanian economy, perhaps the most of any country outside of Iraq and Kuwait. By the time the crisis broke out, Jordan was hosting more than a million refugees. Approximately 300,000 of these returnees from the Gulf states became permanent residents in the Kingdom. The tremendous influx of returnees placed a significant strain on the already limited Jordanian sectors such as education, health care, housing, and transportation. In addition, the influx of returnees increased the demand on the country’s limited water supplies and infrastructure, causing an increase in the cost of living. These factors led to an increase in poverty and around 30% unemployment (“History: Seeking Peace: Jordan’s Stand in the Gulf Crisis,” n.d.), compared to United States unemployment 25% during the great depression 1929-1941. The Gulf crisis and its subsequent United Nations’ economic trade sanctions against Iraq created serious trade difficulty for the Jordanian state. Jordan’s political position on the crisis, and later its hesitation to implement the United Nations trade embargo sanctions on Iraq, paved the way for the United States to threaten to close the Gulf of Aqaba, Jordan’s only port outlet to the external world.

Two weeks after the Gulf crisis of 1990-1991, President Bush told the *Los Angeles Times* that he would block Jordan's only seaport if they did not join in the embargo (Lauter, 1990). This seriously damaged Jordan's trade relations with the world community, and Jordan was most especially concerned as "nearly 40 percent of Jordan's economy depended on Iraq." (Abu Jaber, 1994, p. 370). Undoubtedly, the first six months of the Gulf crisis was a very difficult period in the modern history of Jordan, damaging its relations with traditional Arab and Western allies as well as creating severe economic difficulties. In fact, the crisis may have cost Jordan as much as three billion dollars considering the impact on trade and declining revenues. Despite the negative impact on Jordanian relations and economy through the interruption of commerce, Jordan ultimately adhered to the mandated United Nations' sanctions against Iraq ("History: Seeking Peace: Jordan's Stand in the Gulf Crisis," n.d.). In addition to the economic difficulties that Jordan faced as a result of the Gulf crisis, the United States suspended foreign aid to Jordan as a response to King Hussein's speech on February 6, 1991. In this regard, James A. Baker III told *CBS's Face the Nation* that the United States may cut its foreign aid to Jordan, stating, "[We] must allocate our foreign aid in a way that makes the most sense from the national interest standpoint." ("Feb. '91 WSJ Article on Jordan King Hussein and Saddam," 2003). The United States Senate also expressed its deep resentment of the King for supporting the Iraqi regime during the Gulf crisis. On March 20, 1991, the Senate voted to rescind \$55 million in economic and military assistance to Jordan. Moreover, Senator Don Nickles of Oklahoma said the following regarding Jordan: "After billions of dollars of aid from the United States, Jordan actively opposed the United States and the United Nations by giving political and moral support to Saddam Hussein." (Tolchin, 1991).

In a letter to the Senate, President Bush warned of the impact of the recession on the Jordanian government stating "Jordanian stability remains important to the region and to U.S. interests -- and indeed to Israel's interests -- and Jordan could play a significant role in postwar diplomacy, especially in the Arab-Israeli peace process." (Tolchin, 1991). In response to Bush's letter, the Senate approved resuming aid to Jordan on a conditional basis as long as the President agreed to certify and report to congressional committees on Jordan's progress in advancing the peace process in the Middle East. Alternatively, if it could be shown that the aid would contribute to the peace process then the aid would be restarted. The President signed a waiver allowing Jordan to receive eventually all of the FY 1991 and FY 1992 aid funds after the signing of the Jordanian-Israeli agreement to a bilateral agenda on September 17, 1993 (Knowles, 2005).

5. Impact of the Peace Process in the Middle East

As the Gulf crisis came to an end, the Bush administration quickly transitioned toward sponsoring peace diplomacy to mend the Arab-Israeli conflict. On March 6, 1991, President Bush informed Congress that he intended to bring an end to the Arab-Israeli dispute ("The Madrid Conference, 1991," n.d.). Consequently, Bush's speech was followed by an intensified diplomatic campaign by James A. Baker III, culminating in the convening of the Madrid conference for Peace in the Middle East in October 1991.

King Hussein was similarly motivated to repair the strained relations with the United States. On February 28, 1991, the King wrote a letter in which he congratulated President Bush for liberating Kuwait. In his letter the King stated:

... well done my friend and you will find me more than ever determined to contribute my utmost to the healing of wounds and to the opening of a new and bright chapter in the history of this region for the benefit of its future generations. We shall commit ourselves to the renewal of the best Jordanian/American and Arab/American relations on sound, clear and solid foundations ('King Hussein I of Jordan,' quoted in Ashton, 2008, p. 282).

On April 20, 1991, James A. Baker III paid a visit to Aqaba to discuss the Middle East peace process with King Hussein. According to *The Washington Post*, "The meeting was the first high-level U.S. contact with Hussein since he visited President Bush in Kennebunkport, Maine, shortly after Iraq invaded Kuwait last August." (Goshko, 1991). In his meeting with the King, Baker indicated that Washington hoped that Amman would play a key role in the peace process. The Baker-Hussein meeting marked a new beginning in American-Jordanian relations.

According to Nigel Ashton's book, *King Hussein of Jordan: A Political Life*, the American peace process allowed King Hussein to show his commitment to the region:

The American-led peace process which followed the [Gulf] war, and which was to culminate in the convening of the Madrid peace conference at the end of October 1991, was soon to give [King] Hussein the opportunity to demonstrate his commitment to this new beginning in the [Middle East] region (Ashton, 2008, p. 282).

In short, US-Jordan relations which were damaged during the first six months of the Gulf crisis of 1990-1991, contributed to Jordan's isolation because of its stand on the Gulf War. Subsequently, its relations with the Arab states that were against Saddam Hussein worsened and its ties with Washington were also negatively impacted. United Nations sanctions against Iraq significantly affected the fragile Jordanian economy. As the Gulf War came to a close, US-Jordan relations began to warm. Baker visited Aqaba in late April 1991, and his meeting with King Hussein to discuss the peace process in the Middle East was considered a turning point in American-Jordanian relations. The Bush administration, like the previous ones, asserted that the stability of the Jordanian state is in the best interest of the United States and its allies in the region. Furthermore, it recognized the importance of the King's role, specifically, in any peace initiative in the Arab-Israeli conflict. It is important to point out that King Hussein and President Bush had a strong personal friendship dating back to 1976 when Bush was the director of Central Intelligence. Since 1976, the relationship between the two grew significantly. However, during the Gulf crisis of 1990-1991, both leaders had a different view of the crisis and were both disillusioned by the course of events. After the Gulf crisis came to a close, the relationship between them was recharged and positively impacted their countries. In fact, after King Hussein's death, President George H. W. Bush accompanied Presidents Clinton, Carter, and Ford on a trip to Amman to pay tribute to the King.

6. Conclusion

This article reviewed the United States' foreign policy toward Jordan during the era of President George H. W. Bush (1989-1993) and provided contemporary analyses of the most crucial political and economic issues impacting the United States and Jordan's relations. Although the Gulf crisis caused disruption in the relations between the United States and Jordan, United States' foreign aid (economic and military) to Jordan was restored after the Gulf crisis of 1990-1991. Finally, Jordan played a core role in the Madrid conference for peace in the Middle East.

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