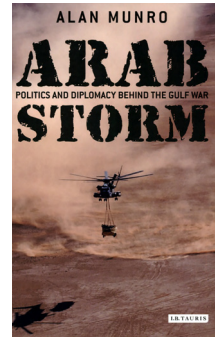


Book Reviews

Arab Storm: Politics and Diplomacy Behind the Gulf War



By Alan Munro

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Reviewed by Squadron Leader Angharad Boyson

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Introduction

First published in 1996, with an updated preface for the 2005 paperback edition, Sir Alan Munro captures the events leading up to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and beyond, from the privileged vantage point of the British Ambassador to Saudi Arabia. As the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia became host to half a million non-Muslim western soldiers, this book details some of the exceptional challenges to be overcome as Western and Arab states fought side by side, for the first time, against another Arab country. As the British Ambassador to Saudi Arabia from 1989 to 1993, Munro was in a unique position to see the interplay between the Kingdom and other members of the Gulf Co-operation Council, the Western nations and other Arab and Muslim countries around the world. Never before had an alliance such as this been formed and Alan Munro was at the heart of those machinations, with countries having to overcome their reservations to establish a lasting coalition that would see the removal of Iraq from Kuwait's soil.

In the first couple of chapters, Munro evocatively captures the mood of tension and ill-ease over Iraqi intentions and actions that led up to the unexpected invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990. Providing a pithy précis on the formation of Iraq post First World War, the context is set to explore how, despite the actions of her unstable leader, Arab nations were convinced that Iraq

would not undermine the Arab traditions and way of doing things. Speculating authoritatively on Saddam's personality and why he miscalculated so badly in both his timing and act of invading, the reader gains a good sense of the shock of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia at finding themselves at the unprecedented juncture and why there was no public response to the invasion from Saudi Arabia for nearly 3 days. King Fahd's mobilisation of the Arab League, readily available as Arab and Muslim foreign ministers were meeting in Cairo on the day of the invasion, saw a (bare) majority of nations voting to condemn the invasion. However, the support given to Iraq by Jordan, Yemen, the PLO, Libya and Sudan indicated that from very early on other nations may be called upon. The idea of an 'Arab solution' had been given a chance, but the Iraqi support from some nations gave cover and credibility to a wider international coalition.

As events move on, the book details the politics that invariably exist alongside the preparations for military involvement. Paraphrasing Clausewitz, Munro remarks 'If war is said to be the continuation of diplomacy by other means, our experience in Riyadh during the coalition offensive of early 1991 was to be the exception to the rule' (page 279). Much of the diplomacy that continued in this period was not established through Iraq or her leadership in an attempt to remove her from Kuwait, but rather with all of the other nations whose support, approval and cohesiveness was required to maintain a united front in condemning the actions of Iraq in her assault on the sovereignty of another Arab nation. Anyone with only a passing knowledge of the events of 1990 and 1991 will be fascinated by the insight to this behind the scenes dialogue. Those with a more thorough familiarity will marvel at the larger picture and of how much could have gone wrong even prior to the first of the coalition aircraft arriving in the Kingdom on 8 August 1990.

The contribution of this book to the plethora of information on the First Gulf War lies in the author's distinctive position within the Kingdom that hosted the coalition forces and was so instrumental in pulling together the disparate nations that formed it. At the same time, the Kingdom's more traditional and conservative elements of society had to be persuaded of the need for foreign, non-Muslim soldiers on their soil. Added to this, many of these forces were female (at one stage US female forces outnumbered the entire British contingent). From a western perspective, it might be difficult to see how these issues could have harmed the coalition's aim of getting Iraq to accept UN Resolution 678 for a complete withdrawal from Kuwait. However, had the Kingdom been unable to keep popular public support for the hosting of the coalition, not only would western forces been forced to seek alternative basing (which did not appear forthcoming) for their forces, the Kingdom could well have come under attack from the Iraqi forces arranged on the Kuwaiti border. It was a precarious balance for King Fahd to maintain, but maintain it he did and Munro gives a fascinating insight into how this was accomplished.

As for the British deployment, the Ambassador has some interesting observations on the RAF preparation (perhaps belying an Army perspective borne out of his National Service). 'On this first occasion a somewhat peremptory instruction, received in the embassy on the morning

of 9 August, came in the form of a telephone call to the defence attaché, Peter Sincock, from the assistant chief of the air staff, requiring us to let the Saudis know the Tornados and their support staff would arrive the next day, to be based at Dhahran' (page 76). It adds flavour to the sense of the haste incumbent upon the coalition, where senior leaders (in this case King Fahd and Margaret Thatcher) had agreed courses of action that were being enacted upon before any of the necessary operational details were being organised.

A well-written, lengthy book, it does move back and forth in time as the chapters are divided by topic so the reader sees the same events again and again through a different lens. Whilst this can be confusing at times, it provides the opportunity to realise the different aspects of the same issue. For instance, whilst looking at the difficulties associated with establishing so many British troops in such short order, another chapter then examines how much easier this was made by the financial generosity of the Saudis. The US received \$13.5 billion, the UK \$1 billion and \$500 million to the French in the early months of 1991 alone, not accounting for the costs she was also picking up (which in the British case totalled some one third of the total cost of British military deployment).

Reading this book in the contemporary context of having operated in Afghanistan and the wider Gulf region for well over a decade, it seems ludicrous that the restrictions on the military involving alcohol, diet (in the avoidance of pork), entertainment and religious services were unexpected and problematic. But it is elements such as this that highlight how this conflict set the scene for what was to become a long-standing commitment in the region. For anyone seeking a wider understanding of both the First Gulf War and our continuing commitment to the region and on-going relationship with Saudi Arabia, *Arab Storm* is an excellent read.

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