**Emotion, Revolutionary States, and Conflict Initiation**

**“The real chance is the one you use not the one you think about” – Saddam Husayn**

This paper addresses the relationship between revolution and war via a case study of the Gulf War Conflict. Extant theories are valuable in outlining permissive conditions but miss the importance of emotion in the initiation of conflict. This paper offers a new perspective for Saddam Husayn’s behavior and a new conceptualization for the relationship between revolution and war that stresses national identity linked to emotion.

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This paper has two goals. The first is to offer an alternative explanation for Husayn’s behavior. Debating the merits of a possible 2003 invasion of Iraq, Mearshiemer and Walt paint a picture of a leader who is essentially rational and deterrable: “Saddam was neither mindlessly aggressive nor particularly reckless” (2003, 54). Others paint a picture of a leader who is “intentionally suicidal” (Pollack quoted in Mearsheimer and Walt 2003). On the surface both approaches appear to hold some validity. This paper offers an alternative theory that can explain Husayn’s actions. Rather than claiming that Husayn is irrational or rational and deterrable, I apply a theory that can reconcile Husayn’s paranoia and his unjustified optimism. A theory that can explain Husayn’s behavior is valuable in of itself: Husayn directly initiated two wars—the Gulf War and the Iran-Iraq War, the latter was the longest conventional war in the 20th century (Murray and Woods 2014)—and was involved in the third, the U.S. invasion of Iraq 2003.

This paper engages a larger literature as well. Recent work aimed to explain the relationship between revolution and war, which is based on an empirical regularity: states that have experienced a domestic political revolution are more likely to be involved in military disputes (Colgan 2013a, 2013b; Colgan and Weeks 2015a). Jeff Colgan’s data set finds revolutionary states to be more likely to be the initiators of conflict (2013a). I consider Husayn to be a revolutionary leader. This paper offers an alternative theory that can help explain this regularity. I see this theory as not directly challenging but building upon aforementioned works. The current literature misses the importance of national identity and the role emotion plays in decision making. I employed a theory and method developed by Jacques E.C. Hymans (2006)[[1]](#footnote-1) that links national identity to emotion and to a cluster of behavioral outcomes. I test this theory with a case study of the Gulf War.

This paper also contributes to a growing field that features emotion. When actors face an uncertain environment, emotion may play a key role in motivating behavior. This paper argues that what is ultimately important for leaders to take such risky gambles is not rational calculation but dispositional factors. The first section outlines a number of explanations for Husayn's behavior. This paper does not make a mono-causal argument. Systemic level variables and domestic political institutions are certainly important, as they provide the context that shaped Husayn’s decisions. The second section offers a theory than can explain Husayn’s behavior. The third section is a discussion of Husayn’s national identity conception. The forth section is a case study an application of theory to the gulf war.

**Explanations for the Gulf War**

Offensive realists highlight the incentives for Husayn to invade Kuwait. Iraq could gain valuable resources and much needed coastline by swallowing up its much weaker neighbor and it is uncontested that Kuwait could not defend itself militarily without another states’ intervention. Uncertainty surrounded the potential for other states to come to Kuwait’s defense, making the rationale for the invasion hinge on the likelihood of outside involvement. Offensive realists argue that Husayn made a reasonable gamble based on inferences about likely U.S. involvement. A general trend of U.S.-Iraqi policy was based on a balancing logic against revolutionary Iran, which culminated in the normalization of relations (Hiltermann 2007, 37–51; Jentleson 1994; Karabell 1995). Offensive realist claim this encouraged Husayn to believe that the U.S. would not become involved if Husayn invaded Kuwait; the U.S. would overlook this transgression just as it failed to punish Iraq’s use of chemical weapons and his support for various terrorist organizations (Jentleson 1994; Rubin 1993). Outside the broader trend, the U.S. did not implement a successful strategy of deterrence. In the face of Husayn’s bellicose language, mixed messages emanated from Washington, culminating in the famous Glaspies meeting, in which Glaspies, the U.S. Ambassador to Iraq was summoned abruptly to meet Husayn. Glaspie stopped short of making a clear statement about the U.S.’s commitment to Kuwait’s sovereignty. According to this view, while Husayn clearly miscalculated, this was a reasonable gamble due to the U.S. government’s inability to signal its intention to protect Kuwait, which led Husayn to believe the U.S. would not become involved (Freedman and Karsh 1995; Gause 2009).

This approach has a number of major problems. Firstly, as Stein (1992) notes, while the strategy of deterrence did not have a chance to succeed, the strategy of compellence, was successful. It is perplexing from a rationalist standpoint, if the invasion was an act of opportunism, as to why, when it became apparent that the U.S. would become involved—first in pledging to defend Saudi Arabia and evolving to a U.S. commitment to eject the Iraqi Army from Kuwait—that Husayn did not take or attempt a face saving off-ramp offered by French and Russian envoys, before the start of the air campaign (Freedman and Karsh 1995).[[2]](#footnote-2) Or Husayn could have agreed to unconditionally withdrawal before either the beginning of the ground or air campaign, theoretically saving the destruction of parts of his military. Other pieces of evidence hurt this narrative. Captured recordings detail Husayn’s deep distrust of the U.S. Seeing that Husayn saw the U.S. as incurably deceitful, Husayn “almost certainly could not have taken this statement (Glaspies’ alleged pledge of U.S. non-involvement) at face value given his abiding fear of American hostility (Brands and Palkki 2012, 656).Other minor issues are inconsistent with the offensive realist position or theory of opportunistic expansion. As the Iraqi Perspective Project notes, it did not appear that the Iraqi Army was prepared to invade Kuwait, as they lacked basic maps of the small emirate (Woods et al 2006). It is more likely that a different motive than opportunism was driving Husayn to invade. Husayn believed to be subject to an elaborate conspiracy to weaken the Iraqi regime via the manipulation of oil prices.

Works in the field of comparative authoritarianism explain Husayn’s behavior with reference to unit-level variables. Jessica Weeks (2014) path breaking work highlights how the preferences of leaders interact with domestic political institutions. Both of these theories have little or no appreciation for the threats Husayn faced—real or imagined—and, thus, are forced to frame Husayn’s actions as being acts of opportunism. It is the contention of this paper that Husayn perceived his regime to be under serious threat. While missing the systemic dimension, theories featuring domestic political institutions are valuable in outlining the context in which Husayn made decisions and should be viewed as a permissive condition.

**What is missing? National Identity and ‘Risky Decisions’**

What is needed is a theory that can bridge the gap between the existing conditions and his actual decisions. Emotion figures prominently in this analysis. The emotions of fear and pride produce a bundle of behavioral consequences to be discussed. Emotion can provide the key as to why Husayn—and many actors—find the motivation to take such leaps in the dark. This new perspective features some departures from previous analyses.

It is the wager of this paper that Husayn’s decisions to invade in both cases are best described not as the products of rational calculation but are likely to stem from “dispositional factors, such as a decision-makers’ core values” (Hymans 2006, 17). According to Hymans, decisions that are highly uncertain, that are non-routine, that entail an element of surprise, and tasks that involve long range planning subject to considerable uncertainty, are especially *unlikely* to be subject to a rational means ends analysis. Husayn could only speculate as to how external actors would respond. Furthermore, it is difficult to imagine how Husayn would go about establishing probabilities about the likelihood of ‘success,’ due to the number of contingency and inherent uncertainties involved.

Domestic political institutions failed to provide structure for Husayn’s decision making as well. In other political systems leaders may find themselves constrained and subject to an architecture that limits their ability to take such action and provides structure for decision-making. Husayn was unconstrained and free to take such gambles. While it is not guaranteed that a state that has experienced a domestic political revolution will result in a personal dictatorship, it is likely, as a process endogenous to the revolution itself, that states that have experienced a domestic political revolution with produce political systems with little constraints on executive actions. This provides an explanation why revolutionary states initiate conflict at higher rates than states at large (Colgan 2013a, 2013a; Colgan and Weeks 2015b). But it is also likely these states will have a leader that has a particular national identity conception—which can provide an alternative explanation for the empirical regularity. This explanation hinges on a revolutionary leaders’ conception of her national identity.

**What is a National Identity Conception?**

Hymans defines a national identity conception (NIC) as an “individuals understanding of the national identity—his or her sense of what the national identity stands for and how high it naturally stands, in comparison to others in the international arena” (Hymans 2006, 18). Note that Hymans sees the NIC as being an *individual* identity. An individual approach is needed because what is missing in the use of national identity to explain outcomes is the marriage of national identity to a psychological process. Constructivists, in the spirit of sociological institutionalism, use national identity to explain why states do not pursue certain paths based on the ‘logic of appropriateness.’ National identity is a shared understanding—a ‘social fact.’ Due to these social facts some policies are simply ‘inconceivable’(Katzenstein 1996; March and Olsen 2010; Wendt 1999). Although valuable in explaining the road not taken, this approach has a difficult time explaining specific outcomes. National identities have to be linked to a cluster of emotional attributes that accompany national identity.

The NIC is a self-other comparison. The self-other comparison is essential, according to Hymans, because emotions are likely in interactions with key comparison ‘others.’ Who are the key comparison other(s)? The key comparison others “are outgroups that serve as the primary basis for in-group self-definition’” (Hymans 2006, 21). In Social Identity Theory, it is the comparison between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ via similarities and differences, which clarifies our own sense of self. The key others need not be limited to another specific state, but can be a group or set of nations—such as the ‘communist bloc.’ The key comparison other is established *independently* of conflict. How is this established? This paper uses secondary sources and captured recordings to establish a key compassion other.

**An Individuals’ NIC**

In order to understand a NIC, it is essential to simplify, understanding the NIC as involving two key dimensions. The solidarity dimension, “what a nation stands for” will be associated with fear and the status dimension, “how high the nation naturally stands” will be associated with pride.(Hymans 2006; Locke 2003)

The status dimension involves “a self-definition of how high ‘we’ stand relative to ‘them’ in the international pecking order: are we naturally their equal (if not their superior), or will we simply never measure up?”(Hymans 2006, 23) The solidarity dimension’s key question “is whether ‘we’ and ‘they’ naturally stand for similar or different interests and values”(Hymans 2006, 22). This could be particularly pronounced for revolutionary states; it is likely revolutionary and non-revolutionary leaders hold drastic differences in core values. I consider Husayn to be a revolutionary leader. While the Ba’athist revolution did not result in drastic social upheaval—akin to a social revolution—there is little doubt that Husayn thought of himself as a revolutionary. The captured recordings indicate Husayn saw himself as the leader of the pan-Arab movement. While some of his ideological beliefs may not be the most cohesive, he clearly saw himself as standing for different values than Israel, the U.S., and Iran; he also sees Iraq as standing high in the international pecking order. I consider Husayn to be a revolutionary oppositionalist.

**NIC based Fear—the Solidarity Dimension**

Why would a revolutionary leader experience fear when interacting with a key other? It is likely that a leader will feel fear because of the stark black and white dichotomization between the values of the revolutionary state and the values of a key non-revolutionary state. The fear is based in a real appreciation for the other state undermining or trying to subvert the revolutionary state, as non-revolutionary states may see their security threatened by the success of revolutionary movements.

Like the opening of a complicated flower, fear of the other results in a number of cognitive and behavioral changes. Fear leads to *higher level of threat perceptions* **(F1),** which can result in higher threat assessments. It can also result in a ‘tunnel vision’ dynamic where actors are fixated on the threat and attribute undue significance to the threat.(Cohen 1978; Crawford 2000; Izard 1991)

“*Lower cognitive complexity*” **(F2)** accompanies fear. Lower cognitive complexity is described by Stein as the actor’s inability to make subtle distinctions when confronted with new information.(Stein 1994) The decision maker has difficultly seeing nuance and slight distinctions. There is also the tendency to conflate threats; simple solutions for different problems are embraced, which can result in decision makers seeing the use of military force as being more efficacious.(Andersen and Guerrero 1997) To be discussed, Huysan embraced simple narratives about both the U.S. and Israel’s ability to orchestrate conspiracies worldwide. This conspiratorial mindset led to Hussein’s baffling conclusion that the US was somehow behind the Iranian revolution (Woods, Palkki, and Stout 2011).

A *greater urgency to act* **(F3)** accompanies fear. A leader may feel the need to take action, particularly hasty action. In doing so, the decision maker relies on stereotypes, terminates the search for more information, and encourages a halt in the analysis of information (Witte 1998).

The final mechanism involves the actors’ desire to *eliminate the uncomfortable experience of fear* **(F4)**. Trying to eliminate this discomfort can take precedent over eliminating the danger (Witte 1998); Hymans argues this mechanism can explain a number of irrational reactions to danger: “from the ostrich approach to simply sticking ones heads in the sand, to witch hunts and the appeal to protective deities, or the acquisition of totems of power.” (Hymans 2006, 32).

The NIC based fear psychological mechanisms acts in concert with the emotion of pride. Without pride, an actor may respond to fear with flight. Pride emboldens the actor who now, not only feels threatened, but believes in their own personal efficacy to effectively deal with the threat. Fear brings pressure to act; pride brings a menu of cognitive changes that push in the direction of taking action as well. .

**NIC Pride—the Status Dimension**

As mentioned, pride, as used in this project, is a measure of how high the state holds itself relative to a key comparison other.[[3]](#footnote-3) The pithy statement “pride before the fall” is telling, as pride, like fear, leads to a number of cognitive and behavioral affects. Pride can result in the decision maker seeing her state as possessing *an undue amount of relative power* **(P1)**, which can lead to unfounded assumptions about a state’s ability to affect other states.

The *illusion of control* **(P2)** accompanies pride. The illusion gives actors the feeling of being *not* susceptible to mistakes oraccidents. The illusion results in shortened searches for information and insufficient attention to the implementation of policy, specifically attention to the unintended consequences of a particular policy. (Competence considered 1990)

The need to *at act autonomously* **(P3)** can accompany pride. Hymans argues that “it (pride) produces positive utility from the act of standing alone.”(Hymans 2006, 34) This may explain why some revolutionary states may engage in perplexing acts from a rational-choice standpoint: they may attack more powerful neighbors with the goal of safeguarding their autonomy.

*Pride as an ends in itself* **(P4)**is the final mechanism linking pride to risky foreign policy decisions. As Jervis notes, at times states desire to acquire nuclear weapons to buttress their confidence in addition to responding to objective threat.(Jervis 1990) This mechanism conceptualizes pride as trying to convince actors in the state of the nation's self-worth and impressing other actors in the international system.(Lewis, Haviland-Jones, and Barrett 2010)

**Husayn’s NIC: Solidarity and Status**

**The Solidarity Dimension: “The Three Circles of Hostility”[[4]](#footnote-4)**

The solidarity dimension’s key question “is whether ‘we’ and ‘they’ naturally stand for similar or different interests and values” (Hymans 2006, 22). Husayn clearly held an oppositional identity conception with Israel, the U.S., and Iran. Following Hymans methodology, I use secondary sources to establish the key comparison other. I also exploit a key resource: captured audio recordings of Husayn in meetings with regime officials. I find Husayn’s key comparison other(s) to be the U.S., Israel, and Iran, all competing for Husayn’s attention at different times. Interestingly, Husayn sees these three as forming circles of hostility and acting in concert to thwart the Ba’athist project. Iran paired with the U.S. and Israel may appear incongruous without an understanding of Husayn’s conception of pan-Arab unity and its relationship with imperialism. Husayn believed imperialist were constantly plotting to inhibit the formation of the Arab nation and aiming to retard the Arab nations’ modernization and development. Ba’ath party idiom distinguished between the imperialism done by great powers driven by their ambition, which included the U.S. and the U.K, and ‘Imperialism on the behalf of ‘another party—this includes Israel, Iran, Kuwait, and other Gulf States (Bengio 2002, 129). This can explain why Husayn attributed many actions by Iran and Kuwait as being part of a larger conspiracy to weaken the Arab nation. Nonetheless, he clearly saw the U.S., Israel, and Iran as holding inimical interests and values with Iraq.

**Americans: “Conspiring Bastards”[[5]](#footnote-5)**

Fundamentally, Husayn saw the conflict with the U.S. stemming from the U.S.’s close relationship with Israel. U.S. policy strengthening Israel could only come at the Arab’s expense. Husayn elaborated, “There are some proven facts of American policy…keeping the Zionist entity strong at the expense of Arabs. And with such a basis, we’ll find ourselves clashing with it (the U.S.) and in one way or another, and so will every genuine Arab who’s ardent for his nation” (SH-SHTP-000-838). Husayn continued: “whenever the American policy meets Zionist policy, it becomes hostile; and wherever the American policy supposes it must obtain its interests at the expense of Arabs, it is imperialistic (SH-SHTP-000-838).

Husayn’s opposition to the U.S. is all the more interesting as the U.S. and Iraq held a number of the same strategic objectives, notably trying to contain revolutionary Iran’s expansion and, post 9-11, both were threatened by religious based extremism. Even when the two states found themselves with similar strategic objectives, Husayn was still hostile to the U.S. During the tilt (1982-1988) with the U.S. supporting Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War, “Saddam’s view of the United states as treacherous and conspiratorial persisted”(Woods, Palkki, and Stout 2011, 18). For instance, while the U.S. was supplying Iraq with weapons, Husayn suspected that the U.S. was helping Iran in a similar fashion, feeding Iran weapons and intelligence. Recordings document Husayn’s belief that the Iranians capture of the Al-Faud peninsula was only possible with U.S. intelligence given to the Iranians. Saddam thought, as well, that the U.S. was spying on Iraq and feeding Iraq ‘bad’ intelligence. These beliefs were validated when he learnt of Iran-U.S. collusion during the Iran contra scandal (Brands 2011). Tarqi Aziz told interrogators the Iran-Contra reinforced Saddam's view of the U.S. as ‘untrustworthy’ and “out to get him personally” (Woods, Palkki, and Stout 2011).

**The Zionist Entity**

This section will provide three pieces of evidence—Ba’ath party language, private recordings, and Saddam’s public speeches— to establish an oppositional identity conception with Israel. Saddam clearly held an oppositional identity conception vis-à-vis Israel or the ‘Zionist entity.’[[6]](#footnote-6) A discussion of Husayn’s views of Israel should be preceded with a discussion of Husayn’s anti-Semitism. While the source of Saddam’s anti-Semitism cannot be known, his maternal uncle who raised him may have influenced his views. Khair Allah Talah—Saddam’s maternal uncle—wrote a pamphlet titled: *The Three Things God should not have Created: Jews, Persians, and Flies*. According to Woods, Palkki, and Stout (2011), the secondary literature tended to down play Husayn’s anti-Semitism, suggesting his anti-Semitism was unfairly attributed, based on his public utterances—which were made instrumentally— and in a guilt by association fashion due to his close relationship with his maternal uncle. Recordings made in private belie the idea that Husayn was an instrumental anti-Semite. Brands and Palaki reviewing transcripts of private conversations find “his vituperative public utterances toward Israel was not merely a matter of political theater or rhetorical excess, but rather indicated a perception of incorrigible strategic and ideological conflict and a desire to wage war against the Jewish state” (Brands and Palkki 2011, 135).

Although Ba’ath party idiom may be used instrumentally, the language is consistent with Husayn’s views expressed in private. Ba'ath party political idiom portrayed Israel as deserving of both fear and contempt. In terms of contempt, as Bengio (2002) notes, Ba’ath party organs placed quotation marks around Israel, reflecting the contested nature of Israel. Another telling term used to describe Israel in Ba’athist idiom, is *al-dahkila* which means stranger or one deserving of protection. In Bedouin custom, this type of person is worthy of protection and hospitality for a period of time, but that this persona must leave after a short interval. The important point, according to Bengio (2002), is not the hospitality but the idea that “*dahkial* cannot be accepted into the tribe, so Israel can never be accepted in the Arab nation” (Bengio 2002, 135). The word *kiyan mazru* was used as well to describe Israel, meaning something foreign and had a medical parallel meaning “strangeness, artificiality… and the possibility of rejection” (Bengio 2002, 135).

Being contemptuous of Israel without fear would hardly motivate action. Yet, Husayn appears to have held a healthy appreciation for Israel’s abilities to harm Iraq. Woods, Palkki, and Stout, reading hundreds of pages of transcripts concludes that Husayn had a “respect for his adversary” (Woods, Palkki, and Stout 2011, 62). Husayn was fond of conceding that “Jews are Smart” (SH-SHTP-000-561). This explains why Ba’athist idiom portrayed Israel as something to be feared. Bengio notes that Ba’athist idiom saw Israel as part of an imperialist scheme to ‘balkanize’ the Arab nation. Israel aimed to dominate the area, acting as a beachhead to keep the Arab nation “divided, dependent, and backward” (Bengio 2002, 134). In recorded conversations, according to Brands and Palkki, Saddam implicated Israel in a number of schemes to weaken his regime. Saddam saw Israel behind the Kurdish rebellions; thought Israel aimed to destroy Iraq’s nuclear facilities and kill senior leadership; envisioned Israel encouraging Iraq’s neighbors to attack Iraq; and aimed to weaken Iraqi morale via propaganda and misinformation. Some of these claims are correct: Israel did destroy the Osirak reactor in 1981. Yet, others are ridiculous, such as when Saddam apparently thought that the “television series Pokémon was, in fact, an Israeli plot to contaminate the minds of Iraqi youths” (Brands and Palkki 2011, 140).

Another telling and fascinating piece of evidence is Husayn’s own fiction writing. Saddam thought of himself as an artist and a poet (Sassoon 2011). Shortly before the U.S invasion in 2003, Husayn was finishing a novel entitled *Be Gone Demons*. The protagonist, tellingly, is an Arab warrior fighting a Christian-Zionist conspiracy. He has three sons representing Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The son representing Judaism is characterized as only caring for money and his expelled from the household. Thereafter, he becomes a usurer and sells weapons, using his influence to foment discontent among the tribes. The son then falls in love, which is unreciprocated. Unable to deal with the unreciprocated love, the son rapes the woman. The two other sons are portrayed in a favorable light. (Woods, Palkki, and Stout 2011, 62).[[7]](#footnote-7)

The captured recordings document deep and consistent hostility towards Israel. Woods et al., reading numerous transcripts find that Saddam believed that the *The Protocols the Elders of Zion* to be an accurate “guide to understanding Zionist actions” (Woods, Palkki, and Stout 2011, 62). In a captured recording taped in the mid-1990s, Saddam explained: “Zionism has partnered with imperialism and participated in its conspiracy and political plans… for the purpose of destroying the Arab nation… destroying here may not be sufficiently understood. This means maintaining the weak start of the Arab nation and gradually reinforcing and transforming the feelings that it is incapable of forming an Arab nation…” (SH-SHTP-A-001-211). In 1985, shortly after an Israeli air strike on the Palestine Liberation Organization, Saddam discussed that there would be no room for accommodation with Israel and the Arabs. “Even if it achieved security in the manner that we now see—meaning geographic security—the social and political security will absolutely never be achieved between Israel and the Arabs,” Saddam concluded. He continued “either the Arabs are slaves to Israel and Israel controls their destinies, or the Arabs can be their own master and Israel is like Formosa’s location to China at best. Without that rule, it is not possible to ease the issue between the Arabs and Israel” (SH-SHTP-V-000-567 pg. 70).

**Iran: “The Yellow Storm”**

Saddam held an oppositional identity conception with Iran as well. Geography made the animosity between Iran and Iraq take on a different more intimate dimension. As Saddam’s uncle wrote: “Iran is a dagger in the heart of the Arabs, therefore it must be removed so that that the Arabs can regain their health and recover their strength, and only then can they face up to foreign enemies. As the old proverb has it: ‘He who lies with us is the worst thief” (Bengio 2002, 145). Territorial disputes provided ample opportunities for conflict. Shortly after the Ba'ath party taking power in 1969, Tehran revoked the Shat-al-Arab agreement of 1937 and in 1971 the shah made territorial claims on three islands in the Gulf, which held the potential to disrupt traffic in the channel. Feeding the fears of encirclement was the shah, with U.S. backing, assuming the role of the ‘police man’ of the Gulf in the early 1970s. More troubling for Ba’ath party leadership, was the shah’s support for Kurdish separatist movements in Northern Iraq. While the Shah and Husayn clashed, relations deteriorated further with the subsequent Iranian revolution.

As Gause notes, while the relationship between the shah and Ba’athist regime was hardly positive, both refrained from making attacks on each other’s domestic political legitimacy, as “the major regional powers had come to accept the domestic legitimacy of each other’s regimes” (Gause 2009, 86).[[8]](#footnote-8) Post Iranian revolution, attacks from Khomeini were especially neuralgic as Khomeini made attacks on Husayn’s domestic political legitimacy and openly advocated overthrowing the Iraqi dictator. In all, geography and the clashes immediately preceding the Iran-Iraq War must have “menaced Iraq with the danger of partition or of a stifling encirclement” (Bengio 2002, 139).

Ba’ath party language reflected this hostility. Iran called itself Iran since the beginning of the 16th century, yet Husayn referred to Iran as Persia. Bengio argues that the regime did this for a few reasons. It reinforced the basic Arab-Persian distinction, which helped to remind the Shia of southern Iraq of their shared Arab identity and also remind other ethnic minorities in Iran of their non-Persian identity. The use of Persia also aimed to give the Iran-Iraq war “historical depth” (Bengio 2002, 140), framing the origins of the conflict as primordial. Bengio asserts as well that the use of Persia was used to stress its alleged “expansionary nature” (140).

Captured recordings indicate Husayn viewed Iran as constantly involved in conspiracies in order to weaken the Arab nation. “No, they are not Turbans” Saddam explains “the Iranians are satanic Turbans, and they know how to conspire and know how to plan sedition…” ( SH-SHTP-000-561). Saddam saw Iran as a useful proxy for the U.S. and Israel to harm Iraq. Husayn thought that the U.S. provided Iran with weapons in order to urge Iran to prolong the Iran-Iraq War (SH-SHTP-A-000-555). Husayn’s belief in the collusion between Iran and Israel can explain some of his views that are, absent an understanding of Husayn’s beliefs, perplexing. For instance, Saddam thought the U.S. was involved with the Iranian Revolution. Without going into a detailed discussion of U.S.-Iranian relations, it is clear that the revolution was a disaster for the U.S and the U.S. was unable to predict the revolution or orchestrate it. Yet, Saddam held that “they (the Americans) are involved in the events of Iran, including the removal of the shah, which is completely an American decision” (SH-SHTP-D-000-559). As mentioned, the Iran-Contra Affair served as validation for Husayn’s belief in close Iranian-U.S. collusion. Saddam sees Iranians colluding with Israel in the captured recordings as well. In one recording he asserts that that “Iran cannot do anything without the help of the Zionist entity” (SH-SHTP-A-000-626). In another recording made in 1981, Saddam envisions a chemical attack upon Iraq by Iran, planed by the Israelis. “One day, Israel will provide the Iranians with the know-how to wage a germ and chemical attack” Saddam explained. The recordings details how the Iranians are emboldened and encouraged to attack Iraq by the Israelis providing the materials and knowhow to conduct a chemical attack (SH-SHTP-A-001-039). He also believed that the attack on the Osirak Reactor by Israel in 1981 was done with the help of the Iranians and “another international party” (SH-SHTP-000-571).

**The Status Dimension: “The Central Post of the Arab Nation”**

The key feature for the status dimension “is how high ‘we’ stand relative to ‘them’ in the international pecking order: are we naturally their equal (if not their superior), or will we simply never measure up” (Hymans 2006, 23). Saddam envisioned Iraq to be a great power. In Saddam’s words: “we draw a large picture of Iraq. We want to possess a weight like that of China, a weight like that Soviet Union, a weight like the United Sates, and that indeed is the factual basis of our actions” (Bengio 2002, 146). Asides from comparisons between great powers and Iraq, Husayn clearly saw Iraq as the state best able to lead the pan-Arab movement. “While often conflating the concept of self and state, Saddam believed Iraq was the only Middle Eastern state capable of achieving the proper place for the Arab nation in history,” writes (Murray and Woods 2014, 26). Addressing a gathering of the Iraqi Military in 1978, Husayn pledged to make Iraq the firm base of the Arab nation (Bengio 2002, 36). [[9]](#footnote-9) Post U.S. invasion and capture, Husayn in custody, held firm to his belief about the greatness of Iraq, telling his interviewer “God had destined Iraq for greatness. Few countries has ever led the world, yet God has given Iraq a unique gift that enabled in to ‘go to the top’ many times” (Woods, Palkki, and Stout 2011, 87).

In a captured recording, Husayn discussed how and why he envisioned Iraq to be the central post in the Arab nation. In the recording, consistent with SIT, he makes arbitrary– and sometimes inaccurate— distinctions as to why Iraq was the state best able to led the pan-Arab nation. While Saudi Arabia was very rich “the human being is missing. There is no destiny of population and no quality.” Algeria is unable to lead because of its “distant location” and “the limit in the depth of its national thinking, cannot assume the leadership.” Husayn elaborated that “Iraq has everything going for it… it has the depth in its civilization, it has the depth in the population density, and has various types of advanced sciences in comparison to the others and has the material capabilities…No one else can carry out this role. Iraq can make this nation rise and can be its center post of its big abode” (all quotes from SH-SHTP-000-626). Husayn went on to say that if Iraq was to fail, the whole pan Arab movement would fail as well.

**The Mother of All Battles: The Gulf War**

**Fear: There is a conspiracy to weaken the Arab Nation**

Saddam was hardly the first leader to desire to incorporate Kuwait into Iraq. Iraqi leaders, such as Qasim, questioned the legitimacy of the small kingdom and held a longstanding claim on Kuwait’s independence dating to 1899. Relations soured between Husayn and Kuwait following the end of the Iran-Iraq War. Evidence suggests that Husayn decided to attack Kuwait in the summer of 1990 and with an apparent *urgency to act*. This matches predictions make in Section 3, which posits that “’a heightened level of fear and threat motivates people to take some kind of action—any action” (Hymans 2006, 31). Husayn believed Kuwait was part of a conspiracy to weaken the Ba’athist regime via the manipulation of oil prices. Preceding the invasion, Husayn was able to coerce the Kuwaitis to reduce production for a two month period, yet Husayn claimed that he did not trust the Kuwaitis to keep the agreement (Freedman and Karsh 1995; Gause 2009). Based on this logic, destroying the Kuwaiti regime may have been the only way to halt the actual or the potential manipulation of oil prices. In this light, the invasion of Kuwait makes sense and can explain Husayn’s desire to incorporate Kuwait into Iraq, but has a difficult time explaining the apparent urgency to act. According to Gause, “there is every indication that the decision to invade Kuwait was made relativity shortly before the invasion, with the regime feeling intense pressure to act” (Gause 2009, 92).

This urgency can explain why the Iraqi military was unprepared for the invasion. Woods (2008) notes that the Iraqi Army lacked accurate and up to date maps of Kuwait. General Hamdani in his memoirs notes that they had to rely on tourist maps in order to navigate the city (Woods 2008, 67). The Navy was told thirty-six hours before the invasion, leaving “the Iraqi Navy very little planning time and almost no preparation time in the run-up to the invasion of Kuwait” (Woods 2008, 73). The Navy lacked the proper intelligence about the Islands they were attacking (Woods 2008, 77). Iraqi Army aviators were told of their pending mission *that* midnight that they would attack at 0350 that morning. “A senior officer remarked … that the operations were not planned very well and were… spur of the moment, ” writes Woods (2008, 80). Even more troubling, the Iraqi army appeared to have not given much thought to how Kuwait was going to be occupied and administered (Woods 2008, 101).

Husayn may have felt the urgency due to his acute financial distress. However, form a rationalist standpoint attacking is hardly the unequivocal best means of addressing this problem. Coercive diplomacy may have been a way to vitiate his financial perils. As noted, Husayn was relatively successful in forcing concessions in the forms of aid and decreased oil output from the Kuwaitis. As Gause argues, it made a great deal of sense for Husayn to “accept the Kuwaiti offer of 500 million and the Kuwaiti agreement to return to its OPEC oil production quota, pocketed the gains and then come back to the table later with other demands” (Gause 2002, 53) A theory of diversionary war could explain why he attacked, but again, has difficultly with the timing and urgency. A diversionary war would still need to be planned for adequately prosecuted. What is more likely and supported by the evidence, is that Husayn thought he was subject to an international conspiracy to weaken his regime. The fear induced may have provided the needed motivation to launch this gamble. As we know, no such conspiracy existed, shifting attention to why Husayn held such an inflated and exaggerated threat assessment.

As outlined in section 2, “fear tends to create, on the cognitive level, a predisposition toward *high threat perceptions”* (Hymans 2006, 33). Husayn believed to be subject to an international conspiracy that did not exist, validating the hypothesis that revolutionary oppositionalists will make threat assessments that are ‘exaggeratedly high.’ Remember as Jettelson notes, US policy at this time was aimed at trying to moderate and improve relations with the Iraqi regime (Hiltermann 2007, 37–51; Jentleson 1994; Karabell 1995). Thus, from a rationalist’s perspective, it is hard to explain why Husayn believed to be subject to an international conspiracy. Consistent with the theory outlined in section 3, Husayn ascribed significance to essentially unrelated and relatively innocuous events or changes in policy.

Husayn connected a number of independent external and internal events as being pregnant with malicious intent. In terms of external factors, following the Iran-Iraq War, Husayn’s regime was in a precarious financial position. The regime owed a staggering amount of money to foreign creditors: 35 billion to western lenders, 11 billion to the USSR, and more than 40 billion to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia (Freedman and Karsh 1995). According to Aburish (2000), with the price of oil around 17 dollars a barrel at the end of the Iran-Iraq War, Hussein was facing an acute fiscal problem: more liabilities than income. He either had to decrease expenditures or increase income (Aburish 2000, 192; Freedman and Karsh 1995). It was in this context that Husayn interpreted Kuwaiti ‘overproduction’ as part of a larger foreign scheme to weaken his regime (Gause 2009, 99) . Husayn essentially viewed the violation of oil quotas by the UAE and Kuwait as a declaration of war. He elaborated: “war is fought with soldiers and much harm is done by explosions, killing and coup attempts—but it is also done by economic means” (Freedman and Karsh 1995, 46).

A number of trends on the systemic level likely filled Hussein with foreboding as well. With the fall of the Soviet Union, Saddam was deprived of a powerful ally. According to Freedman and Karsh, the fall of the Soviet Union removed a check on U.S.-Israeli power in the region. “In his view, the decline of Soviet power and the disintegration of the eastern Bloc had deprived the Arab World of its traditional allies and left the arena open for a US-Israel dikat” writes Freedman and Karsh (1995, 30).

Husayn interpreted small shift in U.S. policy as being aimed to weaken his regime. Congress placed limits on credits for Iraqi purchases of American rice; American and British officials moved to block the export of duel use technology; and Congressional resolutions criticized Husayn for human rights abuses. Voice of America (VOC) broadcasters deeply troubled Saddam as they compared him to recently fallen dictators in Eastern Europe. Saddam was unnerved regarding negative reports in the media about Iraqi’s use of chemical weapons in the Iran-Iraq War, negative attention about Iraqi nuclear weapons programs, and a money laundering scandal involving at Atlanta Bank (Gause 2009, 92–93).Compounding Husayn’s views of American hostility, was his poor understanding of U.S. politics writ large. According to the Iraqi Perspective Project, Husayn was confused about how Congress could not reflect the views or policies of the executive branch (Woods et al 2006). Similarly, it is likely, according the Karabell, that Husayn “interpreted criticism from the US media as criticism from the Bush Administration” ( 1995, 39).

According the Gause (2009), Husayn thought an air strike was likely from Israel during this time, similar to the strike on the Oskirk reactor in 1981. Husayn saw other actors aimed to thwart his quest for weapons of mass destruction. A Canadian scientist, Gerald Bell, was assassinated in Belgium on March 22, 1990. Bell was involved in a project to develop a ‘super-gun’ for the Iraqi military. Saddam attributed Bell’s assassination to the Israelis (Woods 2008). A few weeks later, European countries impounded high-tech devices thought to be of duel use for an Iraqi weapons program (Gause 2009, 95).

Internal aspects were a cause of great concern as well. During the Iran-Iraq War, Husayn was forced to concede a degree of autonomy to the military. Upon completion of the conflict and ever concerned about the militaries ability to orchestrate a coup, Husayn aimed to purge and break the corporate coherence of the Iraqi Army (Cockburn and Cockburn 2000). In 1988 and 1989 “scores of officers were arrested and executed” (Gause 2009, 93). Hundreds of officers were forced to retire as well. Husayn apparently saw the internal conspirators being helped by outside powers. According to Al-Bazzaz, Ba’athist offices believed “during 1989 that a number of foreign powers, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the U.S. were attempting to infiltrate Iraqi society to collect intelligence and pressure the government” (Gause 2009, 93). In May 1989 Adnan Khayrallah, a prominent Iraqi general, died in a helicopter crash. Razoux (2015) argues that this crash was no accident as was likely ordered by Saddam’s son Uday because of his belief in Khayrallah’s independent sources of power and popularity within the military. In addition, three attempts were made on Hussein’s life in the period of 1988 to 1990. The last two were especially troubling as one originated with the Republican Guard—Husayn’s elite force—and one in which Hussein “narrowly escaped an assassination attempt by Army officers while he was riding in his car through Baghdad” (Freedman and Karsh 1995, 30).

How do we know Saddam was troubled by this conspiracy? Saddam personally brought up the Voice of American broadcasts with April Glaspie. Tariq Aziz raised the conspiracy issue with James Baker in a meeting in Washington. Via the Saudi embassy, Saddam voiced concern to President Bush regarding U.S. intentions. H.W. Bush aimed to reassure Saddam that there was no such conspiracy, yet, according to Tariq Aziz—especially after Iran-Contra—Husayn was unmoved by U.S. pledges. Wafic al-Sammuri, a senior Iraqi general who defected, claims that Saddam told him in March 1990: “American is coordinating with Saudi Arabia. The UAE and Kuwait is in a conspiracy against us. They are trying to reduce the price of oil to affect our military industries and our scientific research, to force us to reduce the size of our armed forces … You must expect from another direction an Israeli military strike, or more than one, to destroy some of our important targets as part of this conspiracy” (Gause 2009, 93). Wafic al-Samurri also notes that in early 1990, the Iraqi intelligence services began receiving reports “from Saddam's offices” about plans to strike Iraqi weapons facilities (Gause 2009, 93). Saddam appeared to be deeply troubled by this conspiracy. In this period of time, Husayn made his famous ‘burn half of Israel speech’—“by God, we will make fire eat up half of Israel if it tries against Iraq” (Karabell 1995, 40)— and executed Iranian born British citizen, Farzad Bazoft, resulting in the withdraw of the British ambassador to Iraq. Saddam publically justified the execution of Bazolft and claimed that western powers were trying to frame him for developing nuclear weapons (Karabell 1995, 39).

This is clearly a case of exaggerated threat perception. There were small changes in US policy, specifically the suspension of credits for agricultural goods. Additionally there was also Congressional criticism regarding human rights abuses. But, the U.S. government was not part of an elaborate plot to weaken the Iraqi regime. In fact, just the opposite: until the invasion of Kuwait, the US was following a policy of ‘constructive engagement’ with Iraq (Karabell 1995, 45). As NSD-26 outlined, the Bush administration aimed to make Iraq a “pillar of US policy in the Gulf, a bulwark against Iran, and a possible ally of US interests in the Arab-Israeli dialogue, Lebanon, and the Taif accords” (Karabell 1995, 37). The US made numerous attempts to assure Husayn of its benign intent. H.W. Bush publically reiterated his desire for continued constructive engagement; Bob Dole and Alan Simpson, two republican senators, traveled to Mosul on April 11 1990 to personally reassure Husayn of Bush’s desire for better relations; April Glaspie wrote to the Iraqi’s, regarding the VOC broadcasts, that “it was not the intention of the US to question the legitimacy of the regime or to interfere in its internal affairs” (Karabell 1995, 39). Yet these gestures did not move Husayn. Consistent with the theory outlined in section 2, he essentially connected a myriad of independent events into a tapestry that involved the US and Israel orchestrating a massive campaign to destabilize his regime. Without the belief in this conspiracy, it is difficult to explain why he rushed and took the leap to invade Kuwait at the time he did.

Revolutionary oppositionalist should also display a *lower level of cognitive complexity* when interacting with key comparison others. Husayn relied on crude beliefs in his assessments of U.S. coalition military capabilities. Saddam constantly reiterated that the U.S. was a ‘paper tiger’ and did not have the resolve to fight when faced with the possibility of significant casualties (Woods et al 2006). He also relied on amorphous and difficult to measure metrics like morale and placed faith in his militaries ability to ‘take the initiative.’ His reliance on such factors allowed Husayn to be optimistic even after the sustained air campaign and in the face of an objective, superior military force. He was able to dismiss important details such as the size and technical superiority of the coalition by relying on crude beliefs about the Iraqi’s fighting spirit and ability to absorb casualties. Before the invasion in a taped meeting with Yasir Arafat, Husayn explained his decision-making style, “this battle will develop... some might do calculations in regards to the nation. I do not calculate the abilities of the nation.” Husayn continued: “I do not calculate in the classical way. How many artilleries, how many planes… this is important but what is more important—is that the son of the nation is able to touch the future with his fingers” (Woods 2008, 52) .He, as well, relied on a number of analogies to the Iran-Iraq War to guide his decision making.

This was exemplified with Husayn’s decision to invade the town of al-Khafji on January 29th 1991. After the initial Iraqi ground invasion of Kuwait and *after* the beginning of the coalition’s air campaign, Husayn personally oversaw a military maneuver to attack and occupy the town of al-Khafji, a town lying just on the Saudi side of the Saudi-Kuwait border. By January 17th 1991, the town was evacuated due to its proximity to Kuwait. According to Woods (2008), the rationale for the operation involved ‘taking the initiative’; they hoped, as well, to force ground engagements with the coalition forces while the Iraqi forces *still* had the capabilities (Woods 2008, 16). Side barring any judgments about the benefits of such an engagement for the Iraqi side in the larger context of the conflict, Husayn was personally involved with this mission, traveling to Basra to speak to commanders. According to senior military officials present at the meeting, Saddam's rationale for the attack hinged on a number of analogies to the Iran-Iraq War. Husayn argued that they were successful in the early stages of the Iran-Iraq War because “we took the initiative of challenging the enemy and attacked it in the first two weeks of the war.” He continues to explain that after we lost the initiative, the war slowed and “dragged on for eight years.” Secondly, Husayn found that “this enemy’—the U.S. led coalition—lacked a level of determination and “would collapse when confronted” (Woods 2008, 18).

There are numerous problems with this reasoning which resulted in Husayn making erroneous conclusions, which is consistent with the theory outlined in section 3. For instance, the basic comparison between the Iranian military and the vastly superior 33 nation coalition is extremely facile. One could argue before the air campaign that Husayn was unaware of the coalition’s technical superiority. Yet, the air campaign which commenced on January 17th should have left little ambiguity as to the coalition’s dominance. The Iraqi military certainly understood this, as the Iraqi military was unable to move or even resupply and repair its damaged equipment, which was something which the Iranian military during the Iran-Iraq war was never able to achieve. Furthermore, Husayn understood and made the basic decision to invade Iran with the belief that the Iranian military was weakened due to the revolutionary purges. The U.S. left little ambiguity as to their capabilities as they amassed on 370,000 troops on the Saudi border in preparation for the ground campaign. This was not an unorganized mess as Husayn thought the state of the Iranian military. Husayn’s belief in the coalition’s lack of morale and dedication may be slightly more valid, yet again the reasoning is questionable. For instance, the benefit of this attack is predicated on the U.S. engaging with the Iraqi army on the ground. This is unlikely as the U.S. would probably not be easily drawn into a ground engagement as they have just achieved unrivaled air superiority. Saddam seemed little concerned about these details and rationalized the benefits of the attack with essentially platitudes about ‘keeping the initiative’ and destroying the enemies’ morale, which is consistent with a lower level of cognitive complexity. If an actor was displaying a higher degree of cognitive complexity, the actor would desire more information and not be as reliant on crude heuristics.

Military historians find the battle of al-Khafji a ‘draw.’ The official Iraqi Ba’athist history labeled it a major victory because it displayed the Iraqi armies’ ‘sophistication’ against a superior force and the battle served to increase Iraqi morale (Woods 2008). Husayn told his senior staff in early February of the success of this operation. It seems merely confronting a superior military was providing positive utility for Saddam (Woods 2008, 27). As Saddam was fond of saying: “the real chance is the one you use not the one you think about” (Woods 2008, 197). One could not find a better quote that encapsulates Saddam’s desire to take ‘leaps in the dark.’

**Pride before the fall: “Who do these arrogant Kuwaitis think they Are?”**

Like many wars, the overall project to incorporate Kuwait into Iraq was a risky gamble based on a number of contingencies. Husayn’s project had a chance of success and some of his gambles proved correct—Husayn was not *crazy* or *insane*. This section argues that Husayn’s NIC—which was revolutionary oppositionalist—can be linked to a number of behavioral, observable implications linked to the emotion of pride. Specifically, the emotion of pride encouraged Husayn to overestimate the likelihood of success and to encourage Husayn to see events as more manageable than they were.

Section 3 discussed pride and linked it to a number of behavioral implications. The *Illusion of Control* encourages actors to feel a sense of control over events that an actor is in fact, unable to influence (Thompson 1999). Furthermore, “such illusions short-circuit searches for information about potential unintended consequences of a given decision, and they also produce inattention to the details of policy implementation” writes Hymans (2006, 33). A different actor may have looked at the invasion of Kuwait as unleashing a series of uncontrollable events. Husayn seemed to be aware of many dangers but ultimately pushed ahead with his plans. Husayn not only likely decided to invade knowing outside involvement was a possibility, but even as a number of uncertainties were resolved regarding the U.S.s’ willingness and ability to eject the Iraqi Army from Kuwait, was still not only optimistic about the likelihood of success, but optimistic about his ability to negotiate a cease fire right up until the beginning of the ground campaign. At a number of junctures, Husayn pushed ahead with his plan with the facile belief that events would break his way.

For Husayn to swallow up Kuwait, a number of contingencies had to break in Husayn’s favor. The gamble hinged on the likelihood of outside involvement. Offensive realists claim that Husayn thought U.S. involvement was unlikely. I argue, echoing Freedman and Karsh’s conclusion, that “Saddam was sensitive to the possibility of U.S. interference” but choose to invade anyway (1995, 62). A few pieces of evidence support this claim. Husayn was a student of Middle Eastern history and certainly understood that Qasim’s challenge to Kuwait’s independence in 1961 invited British intervention (Alani 1990).[[10]](#footnote-10) Husayn claimed that Qasim erred in revealing his desire to incorporate Kuwait into Iraq, thereby inviting western intervention. The operational secrecy preceding the invasion of Kuwait was justified, according to Woods (2008), in order to prevent preemptive actions by the U.S, suggesting he was sensitive to the possibility of outside involvement. Iraqi intelligence reports also hinted that outside intervention was a possibility. On July 25th 1990, the director of GMID produced a study regarding the likelihood of outside involvement. The study “hinted that Kuwait would try to ‘internationalize’ any crisis and noted that the U.S. had declared that it would intervene to help Kuwait” (Woods 2008, 62). More broadly, Husayn saw western powers as constantly aiming to thwart the Ba’athist project, which suggests he would find it unlikely that western powers would stand by while Kuwait—a U.S. ally—was attacked. Furthermore, as noted, the pledges of US indifference were unlikely to be believed as the captured tapes indicate the Husayn’s belief in American perfidy. Based on this evidence it is likely that Husayn understood that outside involvement was a possibility, but decided to take a role of the dice anyway. Immediately following the invasion on August 4th 1990, Husayn, according to Woods et al, was unconcerned about the likelihood of outside involvement, “telling his ministers ‘do not worry about the small things: only pay attention to what is going on in Kuwait” (Woods 2008, 93). Again, Husayn makes decisions with the naive hope that things will essentially ‘work out.’

His behavior between the initial Iraqi ground invasion and the beginning of the coalition air campaign (August 2 1990 to January 17th 1991) displays a similar dynamic: a Pollyannaish belief that somehow Iraq would nevertheless ‘win.’ Husayn gambled as well that even if the U.S. did become involved, the U.S. would be unwilling to eject the Iraqi army from Kuwait. This was based on Husayn’s belief that U.S. action would be limited to air strikes or sanctions, because Husayn believed that the U.S. was a ‘paper tiger.’ As Saddam told April Glaspie, “yours is a society which cannot accept 10,000 dead in one battle” (Freedman and Karsh 1995, 276). In a recorded conversation dated August 7th 1990, Husayn explains that if the U.S. does engage “All they can do is boom, boom, and boom … so what? Nothing will happen, we will give them hell. Give me once instance when an airplane has settled a situation.” Husayn continues, “We are not like Panama, people to be scared by Airplanes” (SH-SHTP-A-001-233). Again this view is not unreasonable: many in the administration, notably Colin Powell, argued that economic sanctions would be the correct response or at least should be ‘given the time to work’ (See Woodward 2002). It should be remembered, as well, that at the time U.S. policy makers did not see ejecting the Iraqi Army from Kuwait as being a ‘walk in the park.’ Iraq still held, according to some estimates the fourth largest army in the world (Freedman and Karsh 1995).

Husayn also thought that Arab states would not dare ask for U.S. support. This would preclude the stationing of troops in Saudi Arabia and would divide the Arab coalition. Husayn attempted to divide the coalition by linking Palestinian issues to leaving Kuwait and by attacking Israel, hoping for an Israeli response and forcing Arab states to ally with the U.S. and Israel against their fellow Arabs. While some Arab states were put in very difficult positions—King Hussein of Jordan supported Iraq for domestic political reasons—Husayn overestimated his support among Arab states and the Saudi’s ultimately agreed to allow U.S. troops to be stationed in Saudi Arabia.[[11]](#footnote-11)

It’s important to reiterate that Husayn is not a hands-off leader: he was directly involved with the planning for the defense of Kuwait. Furthermore, captured documents note that the intelligence reports circulating “did not minimize the challenges ahead” (Woods 2008, 127) . An intelligence report dated August 27 indicated that the number of troops amassed ( the coalition troops) on the Saudi Boarder exceeded the number needed to defend the Saudi Kingdom—asserting that the coalition was preparing not just to defend Saudi Arabia. Another report dated August 29th, indicated that “they (the US coalition) believes that the embargo policy is insufficient as a political measure, also they will not wait long before they attack” (Woods 2008, 128). Another report dated November 4 argued “that American administration is serious about attacking Iraq, but we have not received any intelligence evidence that enables us to identify the right timing of the attack” (Woods 2008, 129). The movement of troops was accompanied by statements from H.W. Bush. Besides the Rose Garden statement—‘this aggression will not stand’— which may have been dismissed as an undisciplined quip, Bush said before a joint session of Congress on September 11, 1990: “our quarrel is with Iraq’s dictator and with his aggression. Iraq will not be permitted to annex Kuwait. That's not a threat, that’s not a boast, that’s just the way it’s going to be” (quoted in Woods 2008, 108). One could not ask for a more explicit threat with the accompanying ‘audience costs.’ This should have given Saddam concern: the U.S. – to use rationalist language—was making ‘costly signals’ to Saddam about its willingness to use force to restore Kuwait’s sovereignty.

By January of 1991 a number of uncertainties had been resolved. Congress voted to support the ground invasion; Saudi Arabia allowed U.S. troops on its soil; the coalition appeared to be relatively robust and stable; and the U.S. had amassed a large force on the Kuwaiti border. According to the Iraqi Perspectives Project, Iraqi intelligence officers were fond of reading the *Washington Post*, making it extremely likely they were aware of these developments (Woods et al 2006). Yet, by January 16th, Husayn still held out hope. He thought that the Iraqi’s great numerical superiority and their dedication to the Arab cause would be able to inflict enough casualties on the U.S. that they would sue for peace, leaving Saddam with some of his war booty. Rationalists models have a difficult time explaining why—as the strategic landscape became clearer—why Saddam was still holding out hope for an Iraqi victory.

Captured documents and recordings indicate that Husayn held out hope for a diplomatic solution until February 22nd. Even after the air campaign, “Husayn resolved to remain in Kuwait as long as there remained even a chance of success while simultaneously readying the Iraqi government to counter the invasion of Iraq proper” (Woods, Palkki, and Stout 2011, 188) At this point, Saddam had already passed the deadline set by the UN. Not only did Saddam see a powerful display of air superiority, but Husayn received intelligence reports about the coalition’s superior capabilities. There was also deterioration in his soldiers’ morale—although Saddam may have been unaware of this or may have attribute reports of poor morale to coalition propaganda. In a report dated February 18th, Saddam’s director of intelligence provided what Woods (2008) calls “a pessimistic and ultimately accurate assessment.” The director writing: “we see that the dimensions of the conflict are such that we could not possibly overcome, as far as the Kuwait issue is concerned” (Woods 2008, 207). It is not known if Husayn personally read this report. The bombing was taking a toll on morale as well. A member of the Republican Guard, retrospectively recounting his experience in 1991, found that the bombing “had a very big psychological influence on the fighters, which led a large number to flee their corps and their defensive positions” (Woods 2008, 208). What may have avoided the ground campaign would have been an unconditional withdrawal (Woods 2008, 211). On February 22nd  Saddam told Aziz to announce that Iraq would withdraw from Kuwait over a three week period *if* the international community removed the sanctions against the regime. Due to the qualifier *if*, Bush took this as a conditional withdrawal and rejected the proposal. Recordings indicate Husayn was genuinely surprised that the last minute negotiations by Aziz were unsuccessful (Woods, Palkki, and Stout 2011). Saddam, just like in the Iran-Iraq War, held out hope that Tariq Aziz would be able to lead Saddam out of the corner he maneuvered himself into (Murray and Woods 2014).

The ground campaign began on February 24th 1991. Recordings capture how Husayn dealt with dispiriting information of Iraqi battlefield losses. In a recording on February 24th 1991, an unidentified male tells Husayn of reports indicating that over 500 Iraqi soldiers have surrendered and some units have been hit with over 500 artillery shells. Husayn flippantly dismisses these reports as fabrications, propaganda to diminish Iraqi morale. An unidentified male quips “the media is dirty” and Husayn responds “what they would give—they would announce things they hope to occur or what they expect to occur” (SH-SHTP-A-000-666, 11). Later in the recording Tariq Aziz and others speculate that if the American did in fact capture thousands of prisoners, they should show them on TV, asserting that the Americans are lying. It is unclear at some points in the recording whether ‘they’ refers to Americans or the media, nonetheless it is clear that Husayn discounts various pieces of information, diminishing Iraqi battlefield losses. On or around February 24th, Husayn was not only discounted troubling information; he was still hoping that the coalition will crumble. Husayn elaborated “I don’t think this international coalition will continue to the end” (SH-SHTP-A-000-931). In another recording, an advisor identified as Comrade Muhammad, tells Saddam that an entire Iraqi corps was overran, Saddam quips back “this is lying” (Woods 2008, 225).

Pride encourages the need to *act autonomously* as well. Pride encourages “people (to) want to do on their own what they think they can do on their own” (Hymans 2006, 34). It is unclear what concessions Kuwait could have made to appease Husayn—they did agree to reduce oil production for a period of time. Yet, as Freedman and Karsh (1995) note, there was a status dimension motivating Husayn’s actions and demands. Husayn saw Kuwait as a parasitic neighbor who did not acknowledge Iraq’s sacrifice during the Iran-Iraq War. “In Saddam’s opinion, the Kuwaitis did not treat him with due respect, or take his word seriously” writes (Freedman and Karsh 1995, 62). Saddam appeared to be receiving positive utility—aside from the material benefits of invasion and foregoing the possible benefits of cooperation—in putting these ‘arrogant’ Kuwaitis in their place. “Who do they think they are? They think they’re better than any other Arab country and they look down on everyone else”? Husayn charged in a captured recording. In interpreting this statement, it appears that Husayn takes their non-acquiescence as an affront to his leadership (quote in SH –SHTP-A-001-232).

Saddam appeared to gain utility from merely standing up to the U.S. Note that Saddam thought the U.S. had an undo amount of influence over the U.N and often conflated actions from the U.N. as merely reflecting American influence. “The more they (the U.N) increase its resolutions, the more unbending we become” Husayn explained to Tariq Aziz in a *private* recording made in late September 1990. “I hope they will not become too adamant, because this kind of world in fact does not deserve respect. This low level of being subservient to American does not meet with any kind of respect from us at all.” Husayn continued, “it is disgusting the way the American is leading them (the U.N) under its whip and brings them to any decision it wants from them” (Woods 2008, 108). Instead of recognizing its diplomatic isolation—only a handful of states either abstained or declared support for Husayn’s invasion—he appeared to relish his confrontation and derive utility by not submitting to the U.S.’s and the U.N.’s authority. In a lessoned learned account of the Mother of all Battles, Husayn was fond of framing the battle as a success, simply because the Ba’athist regime survived. There are undoubtedly propagandistic reasons for this retrospective judgement. Nonetheless, Saddam constantly reiterates how Iraq ‘stood up’ the Americans and the survived in the face of overwhelming force. He told a group of senior officers in 1992 in a *private* conversation, “no one dared to stand against America, but Iraq, this small country with all its circumstances as a third world country, resisted America” (Woods 2008, 299). Saddam appeared to “derive utility from the act of standing alone” (Hymans 2006, 34), exactly as section 3 predicts.

Consistent with Section 3, Husayn also displayed *higher relative power perceptions*. The higher power perceptions cannot be divorced from Husayn’s flawed strategic assumptions: such as his views that the US coalition was highly sensitive to casualties and the belief in the superior morale of the Iraqi army which enabled them to withstand the coalitions attacks.[[12]](#footnote-12) Husayn also believed that dislodging an enemy from their position—attacking a fortified position—required a higher force ratio as well (Freedman and Karsh 1995). Saddam envision a direct clash between coalition forces and Iraqi forces as inflicting heavy casualties—a reasonable assumption. The U.S. coalition would likely not play to Husayn’s strengths and attack the Iraqi army where they were heavily fortified. Husayn—who liked to claim to be a great military strategist—failed to predict, as the pithy saying goes: “that the enemy gets a vote.” This may be understandable and it would be hardly the first time a leader failed to account for an enemies’ strategic interaction. Yet, I offer a few pieces of evidence which suggest that Husayn should have been aware of these vulnerabilities.

Firstly, Husayn claimed to be a student of the Six Days War (Murray and Woods 2014). He should have been aware that “numerically inferior forces can be victorious if able to exploit qualitative or tactical advantages” (Freedman and Karsh 1995, 280). One such advantage is air superiority. The air campaign forced the Iraqis to displace some of their forces to vitiate the destruction from the coalition’s air campaign (Woods 2008). The defensive ratio does not guarantee success and could be overcome with technical superiority, something the air campaign should have displayed. Secondly, as Freedman and Karsh (1995) discuss, “Saddam could not ensure a heavy concentration of defense forces *all along* the line, for he could have no confidence that the coalition would confine its attention solely to Kuwait” (1995, 280). While Saddam could not predict the coalitions ‘left hook,’[[13]](#footnote-13) he should have been aware that he did not have the resources to maintain the force ratio across such a relatively long expanse of territory. Third, Saddam should have been aware of his vulnerabilities as during the Iran-Iraq War, as the Iranians were able to breach his defenses. The Iranians breached his lines with untrained Iranian teenagers and at no point did the Iranians achieve the level of air superiority that the allied campaign achieved. To boot, Husayn was forced to repulse these breaches with the heavy use of chemical weapons, which he was aware of because he was one of the only people authorized to employ their use.[[14]](#footnote-14) In sum, consistent with many of Husayn’s decisions, he overlooks his vulnerabilities while inflating his advantages.

**Conclusion**

Saddam’s actions in the Gulf War displayed the behavioral consequences of emotion. It is the wager of this paper that the permissive conditions of domestic political institutions are insufficient to explain why Husayn took this gamble. Emotion appeared to provide the motivation. While all case studies have aspects that are *sui generis*, revolutionary leaders may make decisions in a similar fashion.

Policymakers should be aware of this dynamic. While Husayn was moving his troops near the Kuwaiti border, policymakers in the Bush Administration downplayed the movement as an act of coercive diplomacy (Woodward 2002). Furthermore, policymakers should be aware that these types of leaders may hold exaggerated threat assessments and also overestimate their own abilities. With the knowledge that revolutionary leaders are more inclined to take such leaps in the dark, policymakers should not have been so surprised when they engage in risky behavior.

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1. I am using a theory and method developed by Jacques E.C. Hymans. I did not build the theory or the method, to be clear. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In rationalist language, G.W. Bush made two very costly signals: the infamous Rose Garden statement (“this aggression will not stand”) and deploying tens of thousands of troops to the region. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A basic definition involves general and specific uses of the term pride: a sense of one’s value (general) and specific pleasure based on achievements (specific), (Elster 2000; Nathanson 1994) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This phrase is Bengio's (2002) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Husayn quipped that the Americans were still ‘conspiring bastards’ even during the alleged warming of U.S.-Iraqi relations (Brands and Palkki 2012, 626; SH-SHTP-D-000-567). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Brands and Palacki note: “there was no clean dividing line between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism in Saddam’s thinking” (Brands and Palkki 2011, 141). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Daniel Pipes discussed the novel: http://www.danielpipes.org/1947/saddam-the-novelist [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. According to Little, while the shah aimed to destabilize Iraq he did not aim to overthrow the Iraqi regime. Iranian and American support for the Kurdish was “little more than a spoiling operation” aimed to gain negotiating leverage *not* aimed to overthrow the Iraqi regime (Little 2004, 698; Sluglett and Farouk-Sluglett 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Bengio notes an apparent contradiction in Husayn’s use of identity if used in an instrumental fashion. If Arab identity is emphasized, this leaves out the Kurds who are linguistically and ethnically not Arab; if you emphasize a Iraqi identity, it “raises Iraq above the others in the overall Arab revival” (Bengio 2002, 36). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Iraq had longstanding claims on the territory of Kuwait. Upon Qasim taking power in a military coup in 1958, Qasim refused to acknowledge Kuwait’s’ independence and employed provocative language hinting at incorporating Kuwait into Iraq. The British, based on faulty intelligence, preemptively moved into the region to dissuade Qasim from action. See Alani (1990) for details. If the U.S. made a similar move—preemptively moved troops into the region before Saddam had the chance to invade—this may have precluded Husayn’s 1990 invasion. Note, I argue that systemic level variables are important. The theory I employ argues that revolutionary oppositionalists are not crazy or impervious to systemic pressures, just that they are more likely to take leaps in the dark in the face of uncertainty. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States were directly threatened by Iraq. Syria did not support the invasion as Husayn and Al-Assad had a longstanding contentious relationship. Mubarak was personally livid with Husayn because Husayn broke a personal pledged not to invade (Freedman and Karsh 1995). Jordan, Yemen, the PLO, Sudan, and Mauritania, refused to condone Iraq. Tunisia, Algeria, and Libya, “tried to remain on the fence” (Woods 2008, 104) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. It should be noted as well that Husayn’s goals changed over the course of the campaign and he redefined success at different stages. The initial goal of occupying Kuwait morphed into success being defined as the regime surviving. In the case of the latter, Husayn was correct, ignoring that overthrowing the Ba’athist regime by coalition forces was never the goal of the US led coalition. This seems to suggest that utility was gained not from any objective territorial gains—such as incorporating Kuwait into Iraq—but by merely standing up to the international coalition. He also redefines success for domestic political purposes, but he seems to believe in the idea of success by surviving in the private recording as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The coalition deceived the Iraqi forces by staging a decoy of an amphibious landing in Kuwait while divisions went around the front lines and encircled the Iraqi forces. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Husayn’s was reluctant to use chemical weapons because he the thought their benefits were primarily psychological, and thus, subject to diminishing returns. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)