

U.S. Marines in Battle

Al-Khafji

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The Battle of al-Khafji

by Paul W. Westermeyer



In August 1990, Iraqi military forces invaded the neighboring nation of Kuwait. The invasion was part of an expansionist foreign policy that President Saddam Hussein established a decade earlier when he invaded post-revolution Iran. The Iraqi invasion of Iran failed, degenerating into a decade long war of attrition, but Kuwait was an easier target. Kuwait had financed the Iraq-Iran War for Iraq, but refused to forgive the debt, and Iraq accused Kuwait of stealing oil from the Rumalia Oil Field. Much smaller than Iran in terms of population and geography, Kuwait had focused its foreign and defense policies on negotiation and compromise rather than military force; inevitably, the large Iraqi Army quickly overwhelmed the small Kuwaiti armed forces.

Inside Kuwait, Iraqi troops began wholesale pillaging as security forces moved to remove all those loyal to the Kuwaiti royal family. Iraq declared that Kuwait was now a province, thus eliminating its debt and adding extensive oil fields to its own. Saddam stationed conscript infantry divisions in Kuwait and began building extensive defenses along the Kuwaiti-Saudi border.

While Saddam calculated the military balance between Iraq and Kuwait correctly, he underestimated the willingness of the world community, especially the

United States and Great Britain, to intervene on Kuwait's behalf. His invasion set the stage for a military confrontation that was larger in scope than any similar circumstance since the Cold War. Under President George H. W. Bush, the United States assembled a global coalition of concerned nations, first to defend Saudi Arabia against further Iraqi aggression, and then to eject the Iraqi military from Kuwait. Early in this "Gulf War" American military commanders designated the operation to protect Saudi Arabia "Desert Shield," and the successive operation to free Kuwait "Desert Storm." These military operations were massive undertakings, and they highlighted the paradigm shift from superpowers in precarious equilibrium during the Cold War to American global hegemony in the 1990s.

The Gulf War would be the largest deployment of Marines since the Vietnam War. It challenged the entire warfighting establishment of the Marine Corps—aviation, ground, and logistics—forcing a generation of Marines to put two decades of planning and training to the test. The Corps would see many of its tactical and operational philosophies justified under combat conditions. The maritime prepositioning ships program, for one, proved its worth, enabling Marines to be the first combined arms task force in Saudi Arabia. In addition, Marines tested the air-ground task force concept within the joint environment.

Marines of the 7th Marine Expeditionary Brigade arrived in Saudi Arabia in late August, where they married up with their equipment from the maritime prepositioning ships. Under Marine Forces Commander, Central Command, and Commander, I Marine Expeditionary Force, Lieutenant General Walter E. Boomer, Marines continued to deploy to the Gulf and solidify the defenses of Saudi Arabia. They trained, established defensive positions, and watched the diplomatic efforts attempt to resolve the crisis.

As fall turned to winter, the Marine Corps continued the massive logistical enterprise, deploying personnel and equipment of I Marine Expeditionary Force: 1st and 2d Marine Divisions, 3d Marine Aircraft Wing, and the 1st Force Service Support Group.

General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, the United States Central Command commander, chose the Marines to evict the Iraqis from Kuwait proper, fighting alongside Arab members of the Coalition. As Lieutenant General Boomer's I Marine Expeditionary Force and its partners prepared to breach the fortifications separating Kuwait from Saudi Arabia, the 4th and 5th Marine Expeditionary Brigades remained afloat in the Persian Gulf on-board the ships of U.S. Navy amphibious ready groups, providing a seaborne threat which would eventually tie up many Iraqi resources along the shoreline.

Despite the threat of a Coalition military intervention, Iraq refused to withdraw from Kuwait. Saddam was convinced that the United States could neither maintain the Coalition, nor intervene militarily in a meaningful way. A military struggle to free Kuwait thus became inevitable.

*The Air Campaign*¹

On 17 January 1991, Operation Desert Storm began with massive air strikes throughout Iraq and Kuwait. Although the operation had an expected ground component, U.S. Air Force strategists, who believed that bombing alone could compel Iraq to relinquish Kuwait, drove the first phases. As a result, the primary focus of the campaign was on achieving air superiority (accomplished the first evening), striking strategic targets inside Iraq, then annihilating Iraq's elite *Republican Guard* centered in southern Iraq, and finally hitting Iraqi forces in Kuwait proper.

During the air campaign, Marine aviation conducted hundreds of sorties

On The Cover: *The crew of a Marine LAV-25 scans the desert. The LAV-25 was the backbone of the light armored infantry battalions, an untried concept prior to the Battle of al-Khafji. The battalions were used in a traditional cavalry role, providing a screen in front of the main body of I Marine Expeditionary Force.*

History Division Photo

At Left: *A Qatari AMX-30 tank leads two Saudi V-150 Commando armored cars, the first of which is an antitank variant, into al-Khafji through the town arches. The arches were the focal point of each Saudi counterattack into the city. Used with permission of Jody Harmon*

(www.jodyharmon.com)



Base 801724 (E00373) 4-91 Modified by W. Stephen Hill

against enemy positions in Kuwait and Iraq. Aircrews of the 3d Marine Aircraft Wing struck Iraqi command and control centers, antiaircraft defenses, and strategic targets deep inside Iraq, and later per-

formed traditional reconnaissance, battlefield interdiction, and close air support missions in Kuwait.

A day after the air campaign began, a distraction was added when Iraq began

firing SS-1 Scud-B Al Hussein surface-to-surface medium range missiles against Israel and Saudi Arabia. The political and military consequences of the Scud attacks forced Central Command to immediately

instigate the “Great Scud Hunt.” Although the hunt was unsuccessful, it diverted large numbers of aircraft and reconnaissance resources away from Kuwait and into the western Iraqi desert. In particular, the hunt required the use of the two prototype Northrup Grumman E-8C joint surveillance and target acquisition radar system (JSTARS) aircraft. The E-8C aircraft had arrived in Saudi Arabia after Christmas and was a new, untested battlefield technology.² Central Command used the planes to track mobile Scud launchers in the western desert, although originally designed to track large-scale troop movements, like those that would precede a major offensive.³

Despite the Scud distraction and the focus on strategic rather than operational targets, the air campaign had an obvious and significant impact on Iraqi forces inside Kuwait. It isolated units from the national command authority, degraded troop morale, and made even simple movements difficult, often requiring days of detailed planning.

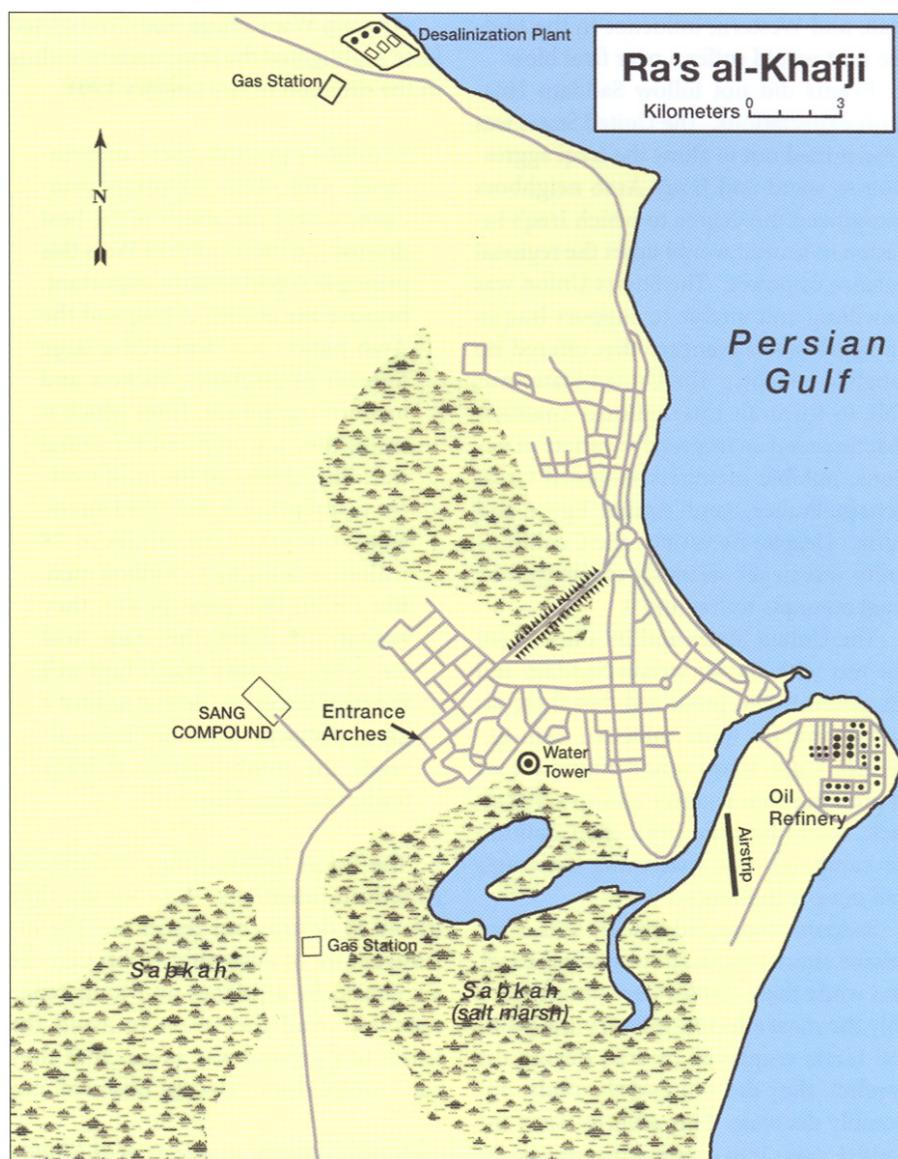
With its diplomatic options exhausted, and enduring the effects of an air campaign much longer than anticipated, Iraq launched a large spoiling attack centered on the Saudi town of al-Khafji on 29 January 1991. Now known as the “Battle of al-Khafji,” it was the first major ground combat action of the Gulf War.

*Iraq’s Plan*⁴

Saddam Hussein was prepared for a confrontation with the United States prior to the invasion of Kuwait, as evidenced by his comments to Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in April 1990:

We are ready for it. We will fight America, and, with God’s will, we will defeat it and kick it out of the whole region. Because it is not about the fight itself; we know that America has a larger air force than us... has more rockets than us, but I think that when the Arab people see real action of war, when it is real and not only talk, they will fight America everywhere. So we have to get ready to fight America; we are ready to fight when they do; when they strike, we strike.⁵

But Iraq’s president was convinced the



Map by W. Stephen Hill

United States would not fight, in part because of the muted response to the Iraqi Aérospatiale AM39 Exocet antiship missile attack on the USS *Stark* (FFG 31) in 1987. The massive military buildup in Saudi Arabia throughout the fall of 1990 did not change his mind. Moreover, he believed that even if the United States desired a military confrontation, the Soviet Union would intervene to prevent it.

If an attack did occur, Saddam was equally convinced that his massive military could inflict sufficient losses on the Americans to force them to abandon the struggle. He considered the American withdrawal from Vietnam indicative of America’s lack of resolve. The United States suffered 58,000 dead in the Vietnam War; in comparison Iraq had lost 51,000 in a single battle with the Iranians on the al-Faw Peninsula in 1986.⁶ He be-

lieved then, as he stated after the war, “America is not in the prime of youth. America is in the last stage of elderliness and the beginning of the first stage of old age.”⁷

Iraq had survived the long, 10-year slaughter of the “Khadiya Saddam,” as the Iraqis termed the Iran-Iraq War, and Saddam believed that the conflict over Kuwait, if it came to blows, would follow a similar pattern.⁸ Air power would be relatively ineffective; the main conflict would be a set piece battle as American forces impotently tried to breach the defenses built along the Kuwaiti-Saudi border. American losses would be severe, the American people would demand an end to the bloodshed, and the American government would then negotiate a peace. In the aftermath, Iraq would become the undisputed regional power, while Amer-

ican, and Western, influence in the Middle East would suffer a near fatal blow.

Events did not follow Saddam Hussein's expectations. The United States was determined not to allow the Iraqi aggression to stand and Iraq's Arab neighbors recognized the degree to which Iraq's invasion of Kuwait would upset the regional balance of power. The Soviet Union was unwilling and unable to support Iraq in an aggressive adventure that offered no tangible benefits. The United States was able to form an international coalition that included an impressive variety of nations; notable members included Great Britain, France, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Syria. Despite its variety, the Coalition's unity was never seriously challenged by Iraqi attempts to fracture it.

The United States and its allies began the war with the air strikes Saddam and his generals had predicted, but these attacks were far more effective than expected. Later, Iraqis would master the art of proofing their country against aerial attack, but in January 1991, the Coalition air campaign was something the Iraqis had never experienced.

Saddam responded quickly with Scud missile attacks on Saudi Arabia and Israel, and while these strikes were unquestionably the most effective military and political tactic employed by Iraq during the conflict, they did not end the raids, noticeably decrease their severity, spur the United States into a premature ground assault, nor bring Israel into the war and thus splinter the multinational Coalition which Iraq faced.

In addition to the Scud attacks, Iraq tried to provoke Coalition ground operations by setting Kuwaiti oil fields afire and by creating a large oil slick in the Persian Gulf that threatened Saudi water desalination facilities. But these actions were no more effective than the Scud attacks.

Saddam expected the air campaign to last a week, and then be followed by the ground war, the "Mother of All Wars," which would produce the desired massive American casualties. Instead, the bombing showed no sign of stopping, and was inflicting serious damage on the Iraqi forces without any corresponding ability to produce the desired Coalition casualties. Something needed to be done in order to goad the United States into the planned Kuwaiti "meat-grinder."

An Iraqi War College study, completed later, highlighted the Iraqi understanding of the situation in late January 1991:

In military practice, there are principles. One of the important principles is that the attack is the best defense. In the Mother of Wars this principle is particularly important, because the enemy of Iraq and the Arab nation has deployed a large number of airplanes, rockets and modern equipment, from which it seems they are prepared for a total war. They deployed the most modern equipment for their field forces, which consist of the armies of 28 nations totaling half a million men. But for all this great power, they hesitate to attack the Iraqi field forces because they realize how well the Iraqi forces can defend against a ground attack. And, they know already, the military genius of Iraq's leader, Saddam Hussein.⁹

The Iraqis believed they understood American intentions: "Like we say, they intend to destroy our forces and the infrastructure of our country through the air attack, by airplanes and long range missiles. And they want to avoid the losses of a ground war as much as they can."¹⁰ Moreover, "George Bush will not

be able to handle the heavy responsibility of heavy casualties in front of Congress and public opinion."¹¹ In this case, the Iraqis did understand American intentions, although they underestimated American resolve, and gravely overestimated the ability of the Iraqi military to inflict losses on the attacking Coalition forces.

The al-Khafji operation was intended to spark the ground battle of the "Mother of Wars" which Saddam felt was the prerequisite for his eventual victory. It was intended as a provoking raid that would draw the Americans into a hasty and massive military response and result in significant American casualties. Despite his deficient military acumen, he correctly identified that the center of gravity in the Coalition war effort was the willingness of the American people to suffer casualties, and he designed his operational plans to strike directly at that willpower.

President Saddam chose al-Khafji as the target of the attack for several reasons. The Iraqi War College analysis noted that it had two harbors: one designed specifically for exporting oil, and the other the Iraqis believed was a base for Coalition forces. An Iraqi force occupying the town would be able to threaten Coalition naval forces in the Gulf. Al-Khafji was also within range of Iraqi supporting artillery in Kuwait. The attack also would force

The arches into the Saudi city of al-Khafji proclaim that "The municipality and residents of Khafji welcome the honorable visitor." Because the city was within range of Iraqi artillery in Kuwait, it was ordered evacuated on 18 August 1990.

Photo courtesy of MGySgt Gregory L. Gillispie



the Saudis to respond; he knew they could not permit him to hold any part of their kingdom for long. It seemed likely that the attack would force the Coalition into the bloody ground war Saddam wanted.¹²

The operational plan for implementing Iraq's strategic goal was relatively straight forward. Five Iraqi infantry divisions defended the Saudi-Kuwaiti border from the coast to the "elbow": from east to west, they were the *18th Infantry*, *8th Infantry*, *29th Infantry*, *14th Infantry*, and *7th Infantry Divisions*. These commands would not take part in the offensive, instead they would continue to defend the fortifications along the border. These border fortifications, called the "Saddam Line" by U.S. forces, consisted of a belt of minefields, antitank obstacles, and triangular brigade strong points. Iraqi engineers had designed and constructed the belt based on lessons learned in their 10-year war with Iran.

The attacking forces would be drawn from the *3d Armored* and *5th Mechanized Divisions* of *III Corps*, under Major General Salah Aboud Mahmoud, and the *1st Mechanized Division* of *IV Corps* under Major General Yaiyd Khalel Zaki. Major General Salah Aboud had over all command of the operation; *III Corps*, considered one of the better organizations in the Iraqi Army, had successfully conducted similar operations during the Iran-Iraq War, as well as performing successfully while defending the Iraqi city of Basrah.¹³

The armored battalions of these divisions were equipped with a combination of T-54/55 and T-62 main battle tanks while their mechanized infantry battalions were equipped with BMP-1 armored personnel carriers supported by BRDM-2 scout vehicles. Their divisional artillery was lavishly equipped with various models of 152mm and 155mm howitzers.¹⁴

The plan called for the *1st Mechanized Division* to pass through the lines of the *7th* and *14th Infantry Divisions* between the border's "heel" just south of Umm Hajul and the "elbow" at al-Manaqish (see map on page 12). This maneuver was intended to protect the flank of Brigadier General Hussan Zedin's *3d Armored Division* as it traversed the al-Wafrah oil fields and the lines of the *8th* and *29th Infantry Divisions*. The *3d Armored Division* would then take up a blocking position to the west of al-Khafji. Al-

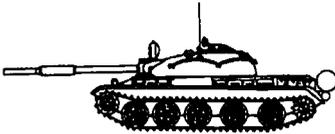
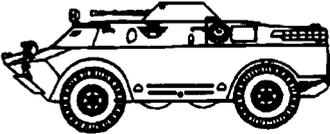
Khafji itself was the target of the *5th Mechanized Division*, which was to seize and fortify the town. Once the *5th Mechanized Division* had secured al-Khafji, the *1st Mechanized* and *3d Armored Divisions* would withdraw back into Kuwait. In theory, after the Coalition ground response was provoked, the *5th Mechanized Division* would retire from al-Khafji and move safely behind the massive fortifications along the Saudi-Kuwait border.¹⁵ The attack was set to be launched at 2000 on 29 January 1991, and al-Khafji was to be occupied by 0100 on 30 January 1991.

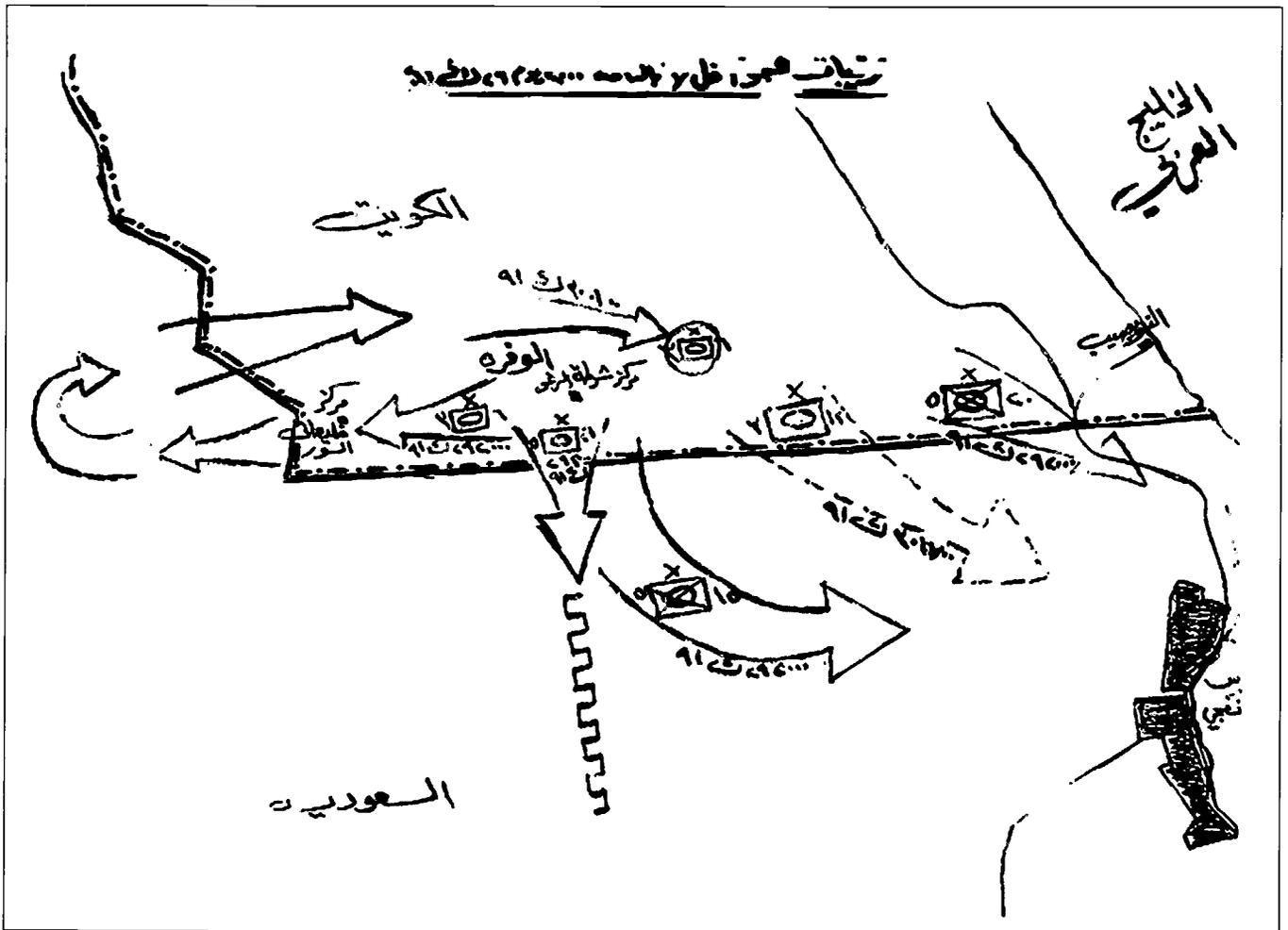
General Salah Aboud ordered that the forces be "dug in" and "hidden underground" by the morning of 30 January. He provided some insightful tactical advice as well: "I emphasized the use, and the importance of shoulder fired anti-aircraft

weapons in ambush in the front and flanks of the fortified positions. And I emphasized how the snipers should be active and effective against the helicopters of the enemy." He instructed his men to light tire fires, as the smoke would confuse the infrared sensors of the Coalition forces. Finally, he ordered his troops "to be economic with the ammunition which is in the tanks and the carriers. Because the enemy air will be focused on the battle territory, especially the transportation, so movement will be very limited."¹⁶ Whatever Saddam's understanding of the battle, at least one of his generals anticipated the difficulties the Iraqis would face trying to maneuver against overwhelming Coalition air superiority.

The capture of American personnel was a high priority. Saddam had deter-

Iraqi Armored Vehicles

Vehicle	Type	Armament	Top Speed
	T-54/55	100mm main gun 1300m effective range Coax 7.62mm MG Bow 7.62mm MG 12.7mm MG	50kph
	T-62	115mm main gun 2000m effective range Coax 7.62mm MG Bow 7.62mm MG 12.7mm MG	50kph
	BMP-1	73mm smoothbore cannon 7.62mm MG AT-3 Sagger ATGM 8 troops	80kph
	BRDM-2	14.5mm MG 7.62mm MG 4 troops	100kph



Iraqi Training Pamphlet, *Battle of al-Khafji* (ISGQ-2003-00054592)

Part of the Iraqi plan for the Battle of al-Khafji, as shown in an official Iraqi history of the battle. This sketch indicates that 6th Armored Brigade's attack on Observation Post 4 was not intended as the main Iraqi effort.

mined from the American prisoner of war experience during the Vietnam War and the Iranian hostage crisis that the United States was vulnerable to hostage taking. He held many Westerners hostage early in the crisis, but released them in December 1990 with little obvious advantage. He felt, however, that American soldiers would still be excellent bargaining chips in the confrontation. An Iraqi prisoner from the battle later told American interrogators: "The sole purpose of the raid on al-Khafji was to capture Coalition personnel. The loss of all Iraqi equipment and personnel involved in the raid was of no importance as long as POWs were captured."¹⁷

When giving orders for the attack to his corps commanders, Saddam summed up Iraqi goals: the "enemy in front of us, if he faces this time our willingness to cause severe damage to him, he won't be able to handle it. He will be destroyed and the news will be heard. And all the chairs of

the enemy governments will shake."¹⁸ For Iraq, the Battle of al-Khafji was not intended as a skirmish; it was intended to win the war by destroying the Coalition's will to fight. At the heart of the Coalition was the alliance between the United States and Saudi Arabia.

American and Saudi Arabian Relations

The United States began providing the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia with military assistance in the 1940s, and as the decades passed the relationship grew. The United States assisted the kingdom as a bulwark first against communism and secular ethnic Arab nationalist movements, and later against radical Islamic movements. In addition, a strong, stable Saudi Arabia was seen as the key to preventing a general war in the Middle East. For the House of Saud, the close relationship and military assistance of the United States acted as a counter to Saudi Arabia's more

powerful neighbors Iraq and Egypt, as well as aiding in the suppression of internal rebellious movements.¹⁹

As the decades passed, however, and hostility against the United States increased in the broader Islamic world, American military assistance became nearly as much of a liability as it was an asset. This paradox was neatly summarized by leading Egyptian journalist, Mohamed Heikal: "the first responsibility of a Saudi monarch is to keep intimate relations with Washington, and the second is to do all he can to hide it."²⁰

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait produced a near catastrophe in foreign relations for the Saudis, as it was clear they could not stop any Iraqi encroachment into their territory without American aid, yet that aid would have to be very public. The intimate relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia had long been an open secret, but now it would truly be exposed. The presence of a massive "infi-