

Gauging the Iraqi Threat to Kuwait in the 1960s

Richard A. Mobley

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CDR Richard A. Mobley, USN, (Ret.), has just completed an assignment to the Defense Intelligence Liaison Office in London.

Between 1958, when Abdul Karim Qasim seized power in Iraq, and the expiration of the United Kingdom’s formal defense commitment to Kuwait in 1971, Britain’s Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) was charged with providing warning of potential hostile action by Iraq. The JIC possessed relatively few collection assets, a fact that increased the challenge of keeping the Foreign Office and the War Office well informed about the persistently volatile situation in the Persian Gulf. Britain moved forces into Kuwait in June 1961 (Operation Vantage) in response to Iraqi threats, and tensions continued to ebb and flow in succeeding years.

The UK’s defense of Kuwait is chronicled in an extensive collection of documents, many only recently declassified. These papers portray a responsive intelligence system, despite collection limitations and the amount of time it took to redirect assets. The documents illustrate the difficulty of monitoring idiosyncratic leaders and UK frustration with human source intelligence and “bazaar rumors” that could not be corroborated by technical means. Despite these problems, the record shows JIC Assessments to be well crafted and credible. They appear to have had a compelling effect on UK contingency planning and force readiness posture against Iraq throughout the 1960s.¹

Setting the Scene

The Anglo-Kuwait Treaty of 1899 governed relations between London and Kuwait until 1961. This treaty forbade the introduction of other foreign diplomats into Kuwait or Kuwaiti territorial concessions without British concurrence. The agreement *implied* military protection in return for Kuwait’s allowing the UK to conduct Kuwaiti foreign relations.

An exchange of letters in June 1961 between Shaikh Abdullah III and Sir William Luce, the United Kingdom’s Political Resident, redefined the international relationship. At that time, the UK *explicitly* agreed to provide military assistance to Kuwait should the ruling family request it. This defense agreement remained the driver for UK contingency planning until it lapsed in May 1971, although in the interim Britain persuaded the Kuwaiti Government to accept modifications to the form of its military response.²

¹ Selected declassified records up to 1970 are available in the Public Records Office (PRO) in Kew Gardens, outside London. Citations in parentheses, such as (DEFE 13 268), link to the relevant folder or bound volume in the PRO. Additional primary sources, up to 1965, have been published in: A. De L. Rush, *Records of Kuwait, 1899-1961, Foreign Affairs II* (Slough: Archive Edition, 1989), and Anita L.P. Burdett, *Records of Kuwait 1961-1965* (Slough: Archive Edition, 1997). *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1960, Near East Region*, Volume XII (hereafter *FRLS*), provides the US perspective on Britain in the Gulf during the early Qasim period.

² Richard Schofield, *Kuwait and Iraq: Historical Claims and Territorial Disputes* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1991), pp. 58-90.

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Iraq was unstable between 1958 and 1971. Ruling uneasily since seizing power in 1958, Qasim reacted quickly and with vitriol to the Anglo-Kuwaiti exchange of letters in 1961. Until Qasim was killed during a coup in 1963, strident Iraqi rhetoric convinced Whitehall that it did not dare rule out the threat of Iraqi invasion. Iraqi-Kuwaiti relations improved following Qasim's death, but the UK remained attuned to sudden possible shifts. Qasim's successor, Abdul Salam, died in a helicopter accident in April 1966. His brother, Abdul Rahman Aref, governed until he was killed in the Baathist coup of July 1968. Despite Baghdad's constant expansionist rhetoric, internal rivalries fostered an inward focus. Political tensions encouraged Iraqi leaders to retain forces in Baghdad, and a Kurdish rebellion tied down much of the rest of the Iraqi army.⁵

London relied upon the JIC to orchestrate national level intelligence collection, analysis, and dissemination. Comprising senior members of the Foreign Office (later Foreign and Commonwealth Office), the War Office (later Ministry of Defence), and the Treasury, and the heads of the three

⁵ Miriam Joyce, *Kuwait 1945-1966. An Anglo-American Perspective* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 1998)

intelligence and security agencies, the JIC was the sole source of finished all-source estimates regarding Iraqi and Kuwaiti capabilities and intentions. These were similar to National Intelligence Estimates in the United States.⁶ A typical long-term JIC Assessment on Iraq might include one or two pages of conclusions for senior readership and

⁶ Her Majesty's Stationery Office (HMSO), *Central Intelligence Machinery* (London: HMSO, 1996). Many JIC documents on the Iraqi threat to Kuwait through 1962 are declassified in full; beyond that year, JIC papers are often paraphrased in Chiefs of Staff correspondence and minutes.

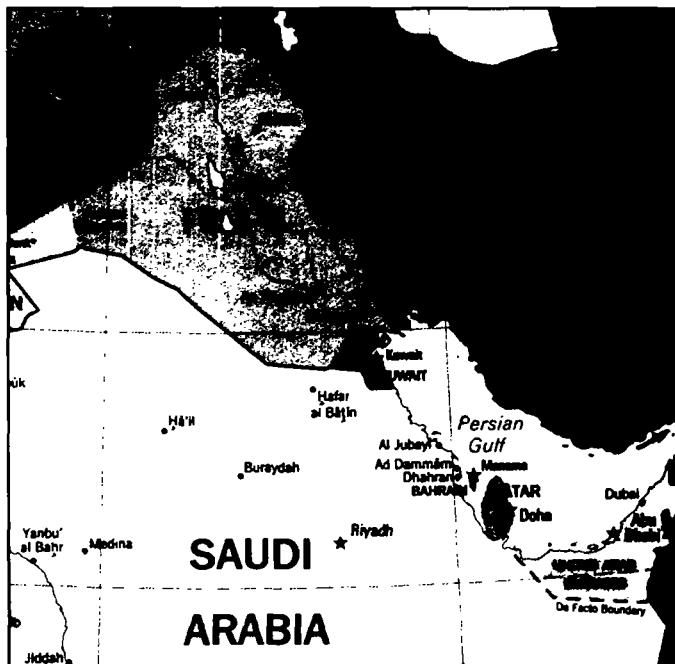
then—in a lengthy annex—a fleshing out of methodology, collection issues, and detailed political, economic, and military estimates on Iraq. These were issued irregularly until the UK intervention in Kuwait in 1961. At that point, the military requested an update on Iraqi intentions every four to six weeks, although within a year production shifted to a semi-annual schedule. JIC Assessments invariably addressed likely Iraqi attack scenarios and associated warning times. As such, they provided input into the UK's contingency planning and influenced the alert posture for forces committed to defend Kuwait.⁵

British Interests in the Region

Between mid-1958 and mid-1961, JIC Assessments focused on the dangers of internal instability in Kuwait

and Iraq and the likely reaction of other countries in the region to a possible UK intervention. Whitehall's greatest fear was that domestic unrest, primarily in Kuwait but also in Iraq, could endanger the flow of oil to the

⁵ Chiefs of Staff Committee, "Confidential Annex" to meeting of 7 November 1961, *Records of Kuwait 1961-1965*, volume for 1961, (Slough: Archive Edition, 1997), pp. 247-248 (hereafter cited as *Records of Kuwait*). Chiefs of Staff (62) 55, meeting minutes, "Iraqi Threat to Kuwait," *Records of Ministry of Defence* (hereafter DEFE) 11-226. The JIC also produced current intelligence updates on Iraq and routinely discussed Iraq in its weekly worldwide intelligence summary.



(CIA map)

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United Kingdom. Consequently, UK military planning focused on intervention to protect oil fields.⁶

To support military contingency planning, the JIC also addressed Iraq's ability to invade Kuwait, but its reports clearly and repeatedly discounted the likelihood of aggression. Such scenarios did not drive UK military planning at that time. Shortly after Qasim's coup in 1958, the JIC assessed that the new regime would be neutralist and closely associated with the United Arab Republic (UAR). Although it would “no doubt maintain Iraqi claims” to Kuwait, the JIC concluded that Qasim was unlikely to invade. Rather, the Iraqis would pin their hopes on subversion from within Kuwait.⁷ However, the JIC doubted even this scenario. Members judged that a US Special National Intelligence Estimate of the time overstated the danger of instability in Kuwait. UK analysts believed that the Iraqi revolution had “considerable impact” in Kuwait, but they judged that the Kuwaiti royal family was determined to avoid a similar fate.⁸

⁶ There is a wealth of UK and US documentation on Anglo-American planning for military intervention in the Middle East during 1958. See: message from State Department to American Embassy London, 31 July 1958; Memorandum from Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern, South Asian, and African Affairs to Secretary of State Dulles, “US Position Re Actions Required to Hold Persian Gulf Positions for West,” 23 July 1958; and memorandum of conference with President Eisenhower, 23 July 1958, all in *FRUS*, pp. 93–100.

⁷ JIC (58) 76, “Immediate Outlook in Iraq,” 5 August 1958, *Records of Cabinet Office* (hereafter CAB) 158.33.

⁸ Minutes from JIC meeting, 13 August 1958 (CAB 159.30).

After evaluating the capability of the Kuwaitis to sabotage their own oilfields and assessing conditions under which the UK might feel compelled to intervene in Iraq, the JIC turned its attention back to the Iraq-Kuwait equation.⁹ In March 1959, UK military planners asked the JIC to discuss how Iraq might invade Kuwait; they explicitly stated that the paper was not to assess the likelihood of invasion.¹⁰ In the resulting study, the JIC concluded that an Iraqi invasion force would comprise no more than two brigade groups and an armored regiment of perhaps 70 tanks. Some 300 paratroopers might participate, although this was unlikely. The attack would receive moderate air support, which would quickly become slight. The inability to properly service aircraft, armor, and motor transport was likely to be high. Either the Soviets or the UAR might provide materiel and advisory support to the invasion. Finally, the JIC touched upon warning: “[Her Majesty's Government] may expect to receive not less than

four days' warning of the assembly of an invasion force in the Basrah area, but, once this is assembled, she could expect little or no warning of an actual invasion.”¹¹

Although characterizing its assessment as solely a military capability study, the JIC also opined, “We believe the possibility of an Iraqi attack on Kuwait will remain unlikely up to the end of 1960, whatever the complexion of Iraq's government.” Hedging its bets, however, the JIC again noted that Baghdad would “no doubt maintain its territorial claim against Kuwait.”¹²

Responding to further requirements from the Joint Planning Staff and elsewhere, the JIC produced another long-term assessment of Iraq in March 1961—some three months before the UK military intervention. This assessment again devoted only a few lines to the likelihood of invasion during the next year given the lack of anti-Kuwait rhetoric coming from Baghdad. The JIC concluded that the Iraqi Army was capable of little more than an internal security role. Moreover, the JIC noted that Qasim was attempting to foster a general improvement of inter-Arab relations and was unlikely to reverse this policy just when he was beginning to achieve success.

- Significantly, however, the JIC study pointed out that government decisionmaking in Iraq centered around Qasim, who

⁹ See confidential annex to Chiefs of Staff Committee meeting “Damage to Kuwait,” 22 July 1958; and “Military Implications of Extended Operations in the Middle East,” 21 July 1958, both in DEFE 4.109. Also JIC (59) 21, “Military Intervention in Iraq,” 9 February 1959 (CAB 158.35).

¹⁰ JIC (59) 28, terms of reference for JIC paper on the Iraqi threat, 6 March 1959 (CAB 158.36).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² JIC (59) 28, “Assessment of the Iraqi Threat to Kuwait,” 30 April 1959 (CAB 158.36).

suffered “from a lack of mental balance, which makes his actions unpredictable and gives many who meet him the impression that he is verging on madness.”¹³

The March 1961 assessment painted a detailed picture of the Iraqi military establishment. The Army comprised approximately 60,000 troops, manning an armored (4th Armored) and four infantry divisions (1st, 2nd, 5th Infantry Divisions and the 2nd Mountain Infantry Division) stationed in central and northern Iraq. Iraq also boasted a parachute unit of 550 personnel. Only the 15th Independent Brigade Group was stationed near Kuwait. Approximately 75 percent of army equipment was of Soviet origin. The Army had 260 Soviet-designed T-34 and T-54 tanks—more than half of its armor—and another 15 US/UK-origin tanks. Soviet equipment also included 300 to 400 armored personnel carriers, 120 SU-100 self-propelled guns, and 400 field and anti-tank guns. Despite this influx of equipment, the JIC noted that army readiness was hindered by a lack of trained officers and combat experience, weak logistics, and the multiplicity of arms sources. These problems would plague the Iraqi Army throughout the 1960s.¹⁴

¹³Memo from Secretary of JIC, “Outlook for Iraq over the Next Twelve Months,” 14 December 1960 (CAB 158 42); and JIC Assessment, “Outlook for Iraq over the Next Twelve Months,” JIC (61) 10, 15 March 1961 (CAB 158 42).

¹⁴JIC Assessment of 15 March 1961. Also, JIC Assessment, “Iraqi Threat to Kuwait During the Next Twelve Months,” JIC (61) 58, 18 August 1961 (CAB 158 44).

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The Air Force and Navy contributed little to the threat equation. The Iraqi Air Force had a squadron of IL-28 Beagle bombers, two squadrons of MiG-17s, and two squadrons of British Hunters and Venoms. It had begun to integrate MiG-19s. The combat aircraft were based in central and northern Iraq. The JIC assessed that the air force had a “moderate” capability in its primary role of army support. Overall air defense capabilities were “indifferent” due to the lack of experienced pilots and trained radar operators. The Navy comprised nine ex-Soviet P-6 patrol boats and four river gunboats. Six of the P-6s routinely operated in the Gulf. While not speaking highly of the Navy, the JIC later presciently warned of the potential danger of mining by dhows or similar small craft and torpedo attacks by fast patrol boats.¹⁵

Heightened Alert

Alarming reports from the region in mid-1961 changed the picture overnight. By 25 June, Iraq had begun to harshly criticize the recent Anglo-Kuwaiti exchange of letters on defense. Sir Humphrey

¹⁵JIC Assessment, “Iraqi Threat to Kuwait During the Next Twelve Months,” JIC (61) 58, 18 August 1961 (CAB 158 44).

Trevelyan, the UK Ambassador in Baghdad, and his military attaché issued several reports that suggested Iraq was preparing to move armor from Baghdad south toward Kuwait.¹⁶ The Foreign Office reported on 1 July that evidence received from a number of sources over the previous few days suggested that armor and additional infantry were moving south from Baghdad. It cited preparations for movement of armor to Al Basrah (first reported 27 June); administrative steps for “warlike operations”; concentration of railway flats and/or transporters in Baghdad; and (on 30 June) southward movement of armor by rail and road.¹⁷

Sir Humphrey subsequently wrote that the UK also received reports that the Iraqi Minister of Housing had been directed to visit Kuwait to draw up plans for housing there. The Iraqi Government had cancelled leave for a senior Finance Ministry official who was then called in to prepare a revised budget incorporating Kuwait. A senior officer of an Iraqi armored regiment visited Al Basrah to arrange accommodations for the regiment. Iraq created a task force, designated its commander, and moved advance parties from several divisions south to Al Basrah. Finally, Sir Humphrey claimed that the military had requisitioned railway wagons.¹⁸

¹⁶Humphrey Trevelyan, *The Middle East in Revolution* (London: Northumberland Press, 1970), pp. 187–192.

¹⁷Message from Foreign Office to UK Mission at UN, 1 July 1961, *Records of Kuwait*, volume for 1961, pp. 272–273.

¹⁸Trevelyan, pp. 188–189.

Becoming increasingly concerned about a possible invasion, Great Britain heightened its alert status on 28 June. The following day, the UK's Political Resident for the Persian Gulf sent an alarming message:

Qasim has committed himself publicly and irrevocably to declaration that Kuwait is to be incorporated into Iraq.... He is in the process of moving an armored regiment to Basrah area where an infantry brigade is already stationed. He will be in position to attack Kuwait within the next three days. ... We are dealing with an unbalanced man whose actions are unpredictable. We conclude threat to Kuwait's independence is as grave and imminent as it could be, and that we are already within four days' warning period envisaged in Vantage Plan.¹⁹

Taking fast-moving developments into account, the JIC produced a series of intelligence assessments that convinced Whitehall the risk of invasion was high and Iraq might attack with virtually no warning. These assessments precipitated the dispatch of British military units to

Kuwait—Operation Vantage—during July 1961.

With troops on the ground and with analysis pointing to hours instead of days of advance notice, the JIC took steps to significantly

least several weeks after Operation Vantage started. By 3 July, six days after the initial human intelligence warnings, RAF Canberra PR 9 aircraft were routinely flying photoreconnaissance missions along the Iraq-Kuwait border; how-

ever, severe haze often degraded the Canberras' oblique imaging range and the missions failed to find the tanks. In mid-August 1961, the JIC would only say that the reports of the movement of the armored regiment to Ad Diwaniyah south of Baghdad had not been confirmed. Sir Humphrey opined that the Iraqi task force had turned back into the interior.²¹

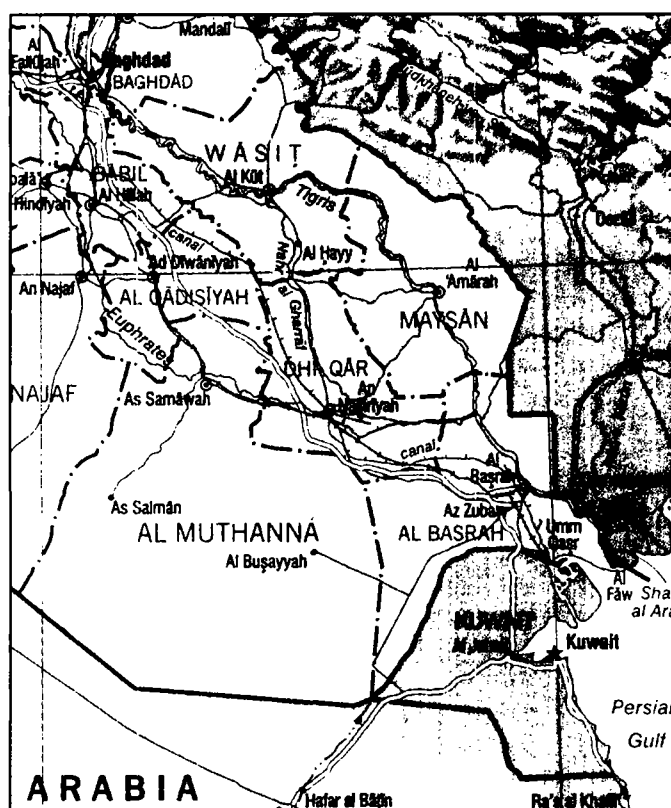
Adjusting Warning Indicators

With the intervention accomplished, the Joint Planning Group requested an entirely new, comprehensive assessment of the Iraqi threat to Kuwait. More than just an order of battle review, this time the study was to pay "special attention

to factors like training and morale." On 18 August 1961, the

¹⁹Minutes from JIC meeting of 29 June 1961 (CAB 159.35). Relying heavily on archives in the PRO, Morice Snell-Mendoza wrote an excellent summary of these events in "The Defence of Oil: Britain's Response to the Iraqi Threat towards Kuwait, 1961," *Contemporary British History* (Autumn 1966), pp. 35-62. M. Alam also produced a comprehensive study of the intervention in *Operation Vantage: British Military Intervention in Kuwait 1961* (Surrey: LAAM, 1990).

²¹Trevelyan, p. 189. Also: CINC MIDEAST's weekly sitrep, 13 July 1961 (CAB 21.4860).



(CIA map)

increase intelligence collection to enhance warning. It also notified its heads of section to be available for recall to work with little notice.²⁰

The decision to intervene remained controversial because the United Kingdom acted even though evidently unable to corroborate human intelligence reports with other intelligence sources. UK photoreconnaissance missions did not locate the armored regiment for at

¹⁹Message from UK Political Resident in Bahrain to Foreign Office, 29 June 1961, *Records of Kuwait*, volume for 1961, pp. 261-262.

JIC issued its report, "Iraqi Threat to Kuwait during the Next Twelve Months." The assessment concluded that Qasim would invade when he believed that invasion would help him silence domestic opponents and retain power by providing a "rapid and resounding" success abroad. UK withdrawal before the anticipated arrival of Arab League forces would tempt Qasim to attack quickly.²²

The JIC paper addressed Iraqi attack capabilities. In a worst-case scenario, it judged that the largest invasion force would comprise an infantry division, an armored brigade (177 tanks) and a parachute unit. Armor would lead on a broad front astride two roads and attempt to seize the Jal az Zaur escarpment, which covered the approach to Kuwait town. Light forces or supporting formations from Baghdad might advance east from Al Busayyah to outflank the escarpment from the south. Because most of these assets were based well away from the border, the JIC still hoped that the UK Embassy in Baghdad could provide four days of warning.²³

The JIC also addressed a much smaller invasion scenario that afforded no warning. If Iraq were to invade with only the forces currently deployed in the south, it could use an infantry brigade and possibly an armored regiment

moved to Ad Diwaniyah, a facility located approximately 200 miles by rail to the northwest of Al Basrah. The brigade could move on good roads at night and "concentrate" near Basrah. From there, the brigade would also cross into Kuwait at night. The mini-invasion could thus occur without "visual warning," although several hours would elapse between when the ground forces crossed the border and when they would arrive in Kuwait town.²⁴

The Iraqi Air Force would support these ground assaults by bombing the airfields in Kuwait and then providing close air support to the advancing ground forces. The JIC concluded that these attacks would be "moderate initially but quickly become slight." It warned that Beagle bombers might strike Bahrain airfield, one of the British Royal Air Force's (RAF's) two bases in the Gulf, but would be unlikely to "neutralize" it.²⁵

To guide collection, the JIC developed lists of indicators based on these warning scenarios. Although the lists themselves are unavailable, the August JIC paper identified key events in the invasion scenarios and evaluated UK ability to collect against them. The paper focused primarily on what members of the British Embassy in Baghdad might observe. Although the paper optimistically stated that "codeword material" might provide information regarding "major preparatory military moves and/or military/air states of alert," the bottom line was discouraging. The

United Kingdom could expect no "visual warning" of a brigade-level attack from Ad Diwaniyah or points south. If an armored regiment from Baghdad reinforced the brigade, London might be lucky enough to get 24 hours of warning if Iraq failed to mask the deployment.²⁶

A larger attack force would require the redeployment of several units from Baghdad. In this case, the British Embassy might be able to give four days' warning of the arrival of these units along the southern border. However, the Embassy's collection effort might be confounded by Iraqi travel restrictions or by prior movement of the units to exercise areas. Alternatively, the JIC postulated that, to reduce detection, Iraq might be willing to risk a substantial delay in the arrival of its second echelon forces—and might not begin to move the units from Baghdad until after the Ad Diwaniyah brigade crossed the border.²⁷

Collection against preparations for an air strike would fare little better. The JIC observed that the Iraqi Air Force might reduce flight activity as a precursor to attack. If Iraqi security measures "permitted," the UK air attaché might be able to provide two to three days of warning of impending air operations in this scenario.²⁸

Sensitive to rumors of a revolt in the Iraqi army as well as to Iraqi troop movements, the JIC remained skittish as British forces began

²²Record of JIC meeting addressing threat to Kuwait, 15 July 1961 (CAB 159/35). JIC Assessment, "Iraqi Threat to Kuwait During the Next Twelve Months," JIC (61) 58, 18 August 1961 (CAB 158 44).

²³JIC Assessment, "Iraqi Threat to Kuwait During the Next Twelve Months," JIC (61) 58, 18 August 1961 (CAB 158 44).

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸*Ibid.*

withdrawing from Kuwait in July and an Arab League force prepared to move in. By September, the JIC decided to consider other indicators of Iraqi intent during the UK withdrawal. The ones used "so far" were insufficient to be a guide for forces in the field.²⁹

Photoreconnaissance and Political Sensitivities

The declassified record shows a major emphasis on planning for timely photoreconnaissance to corroborate human intelligence reports. Even before Operation Vantage, the UK had developed plans to fly Canberra photoreconnaissance missions into Iraqi airspace as far north as Al Basrah. In January 1960, the UK assumed it would have four days' warning if the Iraqis attempted to prepare for an attack by moving forces from Baghdad to Basrah. The Air Ministry offered the Chiefs of Staff a plan to virtually blanket southern Iraq with Canberra photoreconnaissance coverage if the UK received such warning. The planners assumed that night movement was unlikely given the Iraqi Army's unfamiliarity with large-scale night operations, particularly in that area. This dovetailed with the Staff's conviction that the Iraqis would be unlikely to detect Canberras flying high level daylight missions. With low probability of Iraqi detection, the Air Ministry hoped that the Foreign Office would find the missions acceptable. The Staff expected air-

crews to observe southbound movement of concentrations of Iraqi troops. The film was to be interpreted in Bahrain within two and a half hours of time over target. A force of three Canberras flying from Bahrain could provide a minimum of four daylight sorties per day—a figure deemed adequate for warning of major moves south from Al Basrah.³⁰

Running the reconnaissance flights, however, proved politically tricky. The RAF had flown the initial such flight during Operation Vantage in July 1961, but only after gaining special ministerial approval and flying under tightly controlled conditions. The JIC seemed satisfied with mission results. In October 1961, the JIC proposed another reconnaissance flight over Iraq to locate the apparently wandering southern armored regiment. According to the Chiefs of Staff, the presence of this regiment between Al Basrah and Az Zubayr "dominates our thinking and planning." Members of the JIC, however, had to overcome working-level Foreign Office "misgivings about political embarrassment." Ultimately, the Foreign Office polled the regional ambassadors before concurring with the proposal. By 9 November 1961, the JIC reported that the "recently" flown reconnaissance mission over Al Basrah had allowed the Ministry of Defense to adjust military readiness. The RAF also proposed to fly long-range oblique

reconnaissance missions east of Basrah outside Iraqi air space.³¹

Even with the additional imagery, enhancing overall collection against Iraq was a prolonged process. Over three and a half months after initiating Operation Vantage, the JIC commented that "every possible effort is being made to improve our intelligence coverage of the area, but the buildup of this coverage takes time."³²

Responding to HUMINT reporting that prompted renewed invasion fears in December 1961, the JIC proposed additional reconnaissance missions over southern Iraq. The United Kingdom had no evidence of air defense capabilities in southern Iraq. The RAF assessed the risk of detection to be very slight, and that of identification and interception remote.³³ The benign air defense environment probably increased chances of approval. Again with ministerial concurrence, a probable Canberra flew a mission on 23 December 1961. The results from the flight convinced the JIC that "most of the alarmist reports" about Iraqi military intentions could be discounted. Second and third flights were approved for late December, but ultimately not flown.³⁴

²⁹ Confidential annex to JIC meeting, 5 October 1961 (CAB 159/36). Confidential annex to JIC meeting, 12 October 1961 (CAB 159/36). Minutes from JIC meeting, 9 November 1961 (CAB 159/36).

³⁰ JIC Assessment, "Iraqi Threat to Kuwait," JIC (61) 88, 23 November 1961 (CAB 158/44).

³¹ Memo from Secretary of Cabinet to Prime Minister, "Intelligence on Iraq," 12 January 1962 (DEFE 13/268).

³² *Ibid*

²⁹ Chiefs of Staff Committee minutes, 12 September 1961, *Records of Kuwait*, volume for 1961, p. 225.

³⁰ Memo from Secretary of Cabinet to Prime Minister, "Intelligence on Kuwait," 12 January 1962 (DEFE 13/268). Annex to Chiefs of Staff (hereafter COS) memo (60) 6, "Air Reconnaissance in the Basrah-Kuwait Area," 12 January 1962 (DEFE 5/99).

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The substantial lag between the time of the initial alarming HUMINT reports and the Canberra’s time over target handicapped the intelligence effort. The approval process to fly the missions required at least 24 hours. Given the proximity of Iraqi forces to Kuwait, the JIC wanted much faster response from a trusted collector such as the Canberra. The JIC concluded that methods of obtaining intelligence “within our control” would be more reliable. Writing to the Prime Minister, the Secretary of the Cabinet railed against having to rely on the soft, uncorroborated reporting that had prompted renewed tensions in December 1961. “It seems inevitable,” he underscored, “that we shall continue to get alarmist bazaar rumors of Qasim’s intentions and if we are to avoid politically embarrassing and unnecessary and expensive military movements we must have means to confirm or reject such reports.”⁴⁵

To enhance the timeliness of imagery collection, the JIC requested that the UK Political Resident for the Persian Gulf be delegated the authority to authorize one reconnaissance flight over Iraq should he have indications of an impending attack. A single aircraft flying at 30,000 feet or above would enter no more than 55 miles into Iraqi airspace. Time over Iraq would be approximately 20 minutes. If the aircraft was making a contrail, the pilot was to turn back. The proposal noted that there was no evidence of an air defense capability

in the south and the risk of detection was slight.⁴⁶

The Prime Minister approved the request on 9 February 1962. This dispensation was so sensitive that it required his reapproval every 90 days. Fortunately, Kuwaiti-Iraqi relations calmed sufficiently that, from January 1962 to as late as May 1964, Canberras were not dispatched to overfly Iraq at the behest of either Whitehall or the Political Resident. Reconnaissance flights along Iraq’s periphery were sufficient, and these were reduced to biweekly intervals by 1964. Great Britain continued to fly missions along the Iraq-Kuwait border until at least May 1968.⁴⁷

Developing Invasion Scenarios

Warning is an iterative process in which attack scenarios, indicator lists, and collection strategies

⁴⁵ Memo from Prime Minister’s Office, 15 January 1962 (DEFF 13 268).

⁴⁶ Memo from Secretary of Cabinet to Prime Minister, “Intelligence on Iraq,” 12 January 1962 (DEFF 13 268). Memo from Secretary of Cabinet to Prime Minister, “Intelligence on Iraq,” 9 February 1962 (DEFF 13 268). Memo from Prime Minister’s Office, 15 January 1962. Memo from Personal Secretary (PS) to Undersecretary of State, 21 May 1964 (DEFF 13 268). Memo from PS to Undersecretary of State, 21 May 1964 (DEFF 13 268). See also: David Lee, *Flight from the Middle East* (London: HMSO, 1980), p. 258.

evolve in relation to one another. Throughout the treaty period, the JIC frequently updated its estimates of Iraqi intentions and capabilities. In November 1961, the Chiefs of Staff advised the JIC that the issue of warning time and the associated determination whether or not to keep UK forces at a high state of alert had “wide ramifications.” They asked the JIC for a thorough scrub of Iraqi military capabilities, invasion timelines, and prospects for London and the theater commander receiving indications of attack. This time, the military wanted the JIC to assess the *likelihood* of attack in addition to Iraq’s *capability* to attack.⁴⁸

Responding on 23 November 1961, the JIC issued another major estimate in which it further revised its Iraqi attack scenarios. It concluded that there was no doubt as to Qasim’s long-term intention to seize Kuwait “should the opportunity arise.” The JIC also warned that we “must expect him to try to mislead us.” The paper then assessed three possible Iraqi courses of action:

- A “full scale deliberate attack” with a minimum force of one infantry division and one armored brigade, which would require at least four days to move forces from central and southern Iraq to a concentration area close to the Iraq-Kuwait border.
- A “surprise attack” to be undertaken by the forces on hand near Kuwait, with no advance ground movements or changes in Air

⁴⁸ Minutes from JIC meeting, 9 November 1961 (CAB 159 36).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* Also, memo from P. De Zulueta in Prime Minister’s Office to Cabinet Office, 15 January 1962 (DEFF 13 268).

Force deployments or training, but with reinforcements from Baghdad and Ad Diwaniyah joining the attack once it was underway.

- An “opportunistic operation”—the likeliest scenario—that would occur with virtually no warning and involve only ground forces on hand between Al Basrah and Az Zubayr in the south, which could concentrate for offensive operations undetected in less than 24 hours, and perhaps air support. Such action might follow subversion in Kuwait, the break-up of the Arab League Force then based in Kuwait, or an “obvious reduction” in UK ability to intervene. Although the attack force would still require several hours to reach vital objectives in central Kuwait, the JIC warned that “we cannot rely on any warning” in either this scenario or that of the surprise attack.⁴⁰

In 1962, the JIC reassessed the warning times associated with these scenarios. For the first time, it explicitly stated that no Iraqi attack would occur without armor; moreover, Iraq would require more time than earlier estimated to transport its armor to the border because it had moved its tanks north from Ad Diwaniyah and southern Iraq. The JIC assessed that at least an armored regiment would participate in the “surprise” and “opportunistic” attack scenarios. Since the armor was now located in

Baghdad and points north, the JIC concluded that London would receive at least 28 hours warning between when Iraqi armor started moving and when it reached the border with Kuwait. At the other extreme, indications of a full-scale deliberate attack—a less likely scenario—could appear as much as seven days before an invasion. The ongoing Kurdish campaign had sharply reduced the force availability and operational readiness required for action against Kuwait.⁴¹

Citing the latest JIC Assessment, the Chief of Defence Staff summarized the conclusions for the Prime Minister in March 1962. He noted that Iraq still was handicapped by lack of army training and had no armor in the south. Moreover, UK intelligence on Iraq had improved. Stating that Qasim would not attack without armor, he also concluded that the military expected seven days’ notice for a full-scale attack and 28 hours of warning for the “opportunistic” scenario.⁴²

The JIC repeated this line in November 1962. By then, Iraq had deployed the equivalent of two infantry divisions (with medium artillery and armor) to deal with the Kurds in the north and all armor remained in or north of Baghdad. The JIC still judged, therefore, that Great Britain would have 28 hours of warning. It cautioned, however,

that if the tanks moved to the south, the UK would lose its key warning indicator of invasion. A mini-invasion force could cross the border undetected.⁴³

These basic attack scenarios dominated UK assessments of Iraq throughout the 1960s, although judgments regarding intentions and capabilities varied. Qasim’s overthrow and the signing of the Iraq-Kuwait accord in the fall of 1963 diminished the likelihood of a cold-blooded calculated attack. The JIC accordingly shifted its emphasis to a scenario of invasion precipitated by instability in Kuwait. Although the 1960s were characterized by a flood of Soviet weapons into Iraq, the JIC actually reduced its assessment of Iraqi readiness to move against Kuwait as time wore on because Baghdad’s forces were committed to a protracted, set-piece struggle in Kurdistan. Even the tiny proportion of forces deployed in the south was occasionally ordered north.

Post “Vantage” Warning Challenges

The intelligence picture was not in clear focus when tensions rose at the end of 1961, but the JIC leaned forward to fulfill its warning responsibilities. On 21 December, it stated that Kuwaiti military sources had detected indications of an impending Iraqi ground assault against Kuwait. Although noting the key source had often been

⁴⁰JIC Assessment, “Iraqi Threat to Kuwait,” JIC (61) 88, 23 November 1961 (CAB 158-44). Minutes of COS Committee meeting, 28 November 1961, *Records of Kuwait*, volume for 1961, pp. 252-254.

⁴¹Minutes from JIC Meeting, 22 March 1962 (CAB 159-37); and JIC Assessment, “Iraqi Threat to Kuwait in the Next Six Months,” JIC (62) 87, 30 November 1962 (CAB 158-47).

⁴²Memo from Chief of Defence Staff to Prime Minister, “Kuwait-Readiness for Intervention,” 28 March 1962.

⁴³JIC Assessment, “Iraqi Threat to Kuwait in the Next Six Months,” JIC (62) 87, 30 November 1962 (CAB 158-47).

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unreliable, the JIC summarized the reporting, which included references to preparation for a large exercise to be held in southern Iraq from 23 to 25 December: small arms shipments to Al Basrah; an Iraqi request to move railway cars between Ad Diwaniyah, An Nasiriyah, and Al Basrah; and Iraqi air activity near Kuwait.⁴⁵ Lending more credence to reporting than was perhaps warranted, the Cabinet Office sent a flash precedence report to the operating forces on 26 December summarizing a JIC Assessment that Iraq had moved a substantial number of paratroopers from Baghdad to Al Basrah on 24 or 25 December.⁴⁶ The UK Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) had detected anomalies in Iraqi ground communications on 22 December but these were insufficient to provide a convincing case for invasion.⁴⁵ The UK Ambassador in Baghdad, however, discounted the interpretation that troop movements were related to training, asserting that a large exercise involving the 3rd and 4th Divisions could not be carried out because the units were widely dispersed and the Iraqi Army had little experience in carrying out division-level exercises.⁴⁶ Unable to corroborate or discount the reporting, the UK ordered the previously mentioned Canberra reconnaissance

missions over and around southern Iraq.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, the Political Resident remained skeptical that Iraq could have flown paratroopers to the south undetected, citing the lack of activity noted by the consulate in Al Basrah, photoreconnaissance missions flown from Bahrain, and radars in Kuwait that monitored southern Iraq.⁴⁸

Washington did not share London's faith in reporting that suggested an assault was imminent. On 29 December, the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs wrote, "The intelligence items on which the British acted did not seem to us to indicate any real danger.... We are inclined to believe that it would be extremely difficult for Qasim to launch a surprise attack on Kuwait." In view of the potential adverse effects of yet another British intervention in Kuwait, he recommended that the United States advise the British of the "sharp cleavage between our estimate of the imminence of an attack and theirs."⁴⁹

The next major warning challenge occurred nearly two years later, when Iraq began moving an

armored regiment south to Al Basrah, according to reporting of 7 December 1963. UK forces committed to defending Kuwait had lowered their alert status during 1963 as a result of optimistic JIC assessments regarding Iraqi intentions and the lowered state of Iraqi military readiness in the south.⁵⁰ The JIC initially evaluated the armored regiment as having sub-standard operational capability, low morale, and potentially dubious loyalty. Further reducing perceptions of military readiness in the south, much of the 15th infantry brigade previously stationed there had deployed northward. The JIC assessed that any attack would require the return of the infantry brigade followed by a "considerable" period of training. It also judged an attack unlikely because Baghdad remained preoccupied with internal power struggles and because Kuwait appeared calm domestically.⁵¹

Nevertheless, given its significance for reduced warning time, the southward armor move raised several flags. The JIC revised and distributed a new list of indicators of an Iraqi attack on Kuwait and attempted to boost collection. The UK retained a Canberra in Bahrain

⁴⁵Cabinet level assessment of Iraqi threat and UK collection posture, 22 December 1961, *Records of the Prime Minister's Office* (PREM) 11 4359.

⁴⁶Message from Cabinet Office to operational staffs including the Middle East Command, 26 December 1961 (PREM 11 4359).

⁴⁷Cabinet-level assessment, 22 December 1961.

⁴⁸Message from UK Embassy Baghdad to Foreign Office, 22 December 1961 (PREM 11 4359).

⁴⁹Cabinet-level assessment, 22 December 1961, Message from Cabinet Office, 26 December 1961.

⁵⁰Message from UK Political Representative to Foreign Office, 27 December 1961 (PREM 11 4359).

⁵¹Memorandum from Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs to Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, "United States Responses to Tension Regarding Kuwait," 29 December 1961, *FRUS*, vol. XVII, 1961-1962, Near East, pp. 376-377.

⁵²"Memo from Mr. Hockaday (Ministry of Defence) to T.J. Bligh (Prime Minister's Office), 2 April 1963 (PREM 11 4359).

⁵³Extract from Chiefs of Staff 71st meeting, "The Threat to Kuwait," December 1963 (DFFE 11 226), and note to Minister, "Threat to Kuwait" (DEFE 7 2122).

despite earlier plans to return it to Cyprus, and the Air Ministry was to be asked to consider providing a second. Short of Arab linguists, the GCHQ sought to obtain additional Arab linguists from elsewhere in the government.⁵² To supplement photoreconnaissance, the Ministry of Defense sought vital reporting on the state of Kuwaiti internal affairs, particularly any indications of dissension in the royal family.⁵³

The presence of armor so far south increased the JIC's apprehension when Iraq and Egypt conducted a publicized ground exercise in southern Iraq in 1964. In late September, the British Embassy in Kuwait advised the Kuwaiti Chief of Staff that Iraq was preparing to conduct exercises, including armored participants from Az Zubayr, along the Kuwaiti border. Although he did not believe an attack was likely, the Commander in Chief, British Forces Middle East, reported he would "unobtrusively" increase the state of alert in the Gulf. This included arranging for a second Canberra reconnaissance aircraft in Bahrain. Not viewing the maneuvers as "anything sinister," the Kuwaitis nevertheless stepped up intelligence collection against Iraq. They doubled the number of personnel assigned to their communications intelligence watch monitoring Iraqi elements in Al Basrah. The Kuwaiti Air Force also conducted routine surveillance flights along the frontier.⁵⁴

⁵²See also memo to Minister entitled, "The Threat to Kuwait," December 1963 (DEFE 7/2122).

⁵³Memo to Defence Minister for use in the Defence and Overseas Policy Committee, 18 December 1963 (DEFE 13/268).

Reassessing Triggers for Invasion

Although UK analysts and military planners increasingly judged Iraq to be internally preoccupied and unlikely to invade its neighbor, they nevertheless feared a scenario in which internal instability in Kuwait might "tempt" Baghdad to intervene. In December 1963, with reports of armor moving south, the Chairman of the JIC advised the Chiefs of Staff that "the only factor which might lead the Iraqis to take overt action in Kuwait would be if circumstances arose in Kuwait which led the Iraqis to believe that they could arrive there unopposed before we could intervene." He continued, "It is, therefore, most important that the situation in Kuwait is kept under constant surveillance and HM ambassador there has been asked to take particular care to report anything that might give an indication of internal troubles."⁵⁵

The JIC developed this theme in the spring of 1964. It warned that in the event of a pro-Iraqi coup inside Kuwait, Baghdad "might well find it politically difficult to resist moving their existing forces in the Basrah/Zubayr area into Kuwait" despite the risk of British intervention.⁵⁶ The JIC doubted that London would receive much warning of a

⁵⁴Letter from UK Embassy/Kuwait to Foreign Office, 20 September 1964, *Records of Kuwait*, 1961-1965, volume for 1964, p. 155. Message from CINC MIDEAST to Minister of Defence, 6 October 1964 (DEFE 13/268). Letter from British Embassy/Kuwait to Foreign Office, 19 October 1964, *Records of Kuwait* 1961-1965, volume for 1964, p. 134. Letter from British Embassy/Kuwait to Foreign Office, 14 October 1964, *Records of Kuwait* 1961-1965, volume for 1964, p. 133.

⁵⁵Memo to Minister, "The Threat to Kuwait" (DEFE 13/268).

coup, much to the concern of the Prime Minister, who commented, "The lack of warning is rather disturbing. Have we informed the ruler? What is the intelligence system doing inside Kuwait so that the internal situation can be watched?"⁵⁷ The JIC subsequently expanded on the assessment, concluding:

*The Iraqis would be unlikely to launch an opportunist attack unless they estimated that they could establish control in Kuwait before British troops intervened.... Although Iraqi and Egyptian opportunities for subversion in Kuwait will increase, the chances of a successful coup against the Amir are low, and we believe that there is a good chance of obtaining timely knowledge of internal unrest, which might lead to a revolt, from sources within Kuwait but there can be no guarantee of significant warning of the actual start of a coup d'état.*⁵⁸

This assessment prompted the British to revise military planning to focus more on coup suppression as a way to forestall an Iraqi invasion. The JIC was asked to respond to a comprehensive set of questions on Kuwaiti instability, including what forms a coup might take, what kind of political or tactical warning could be expected, and how fast the Iraqi ground and air forces in the Basrah/Zubayr area could react.

⁵⁶Defence Planning Staff memo, "Action Against a Possible Coup in Kuwait," 15 April 1964 (DEFE 11/226).

⁵⁷Note from Prime Minister, 24 July 1964 (DEFE 13/268).

⁵⁸Defence Planning Staff, "Revised Concept for Intervention in Kuwait," 9 February 1965 (DEFE 25/119).

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By mid-1970, Iraqi military presence along the border with Kuwait had increased...[but] indicators of imminent danger were not present and British troops left the Gulf in 1971 as planned.

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The JIC response that summer was discouraging. Again, it was pointed out that, “There is a good chance of obtaining timely knowledge of internal unrest which might lead to a revolt from sources within Kuwait, but there can be no certainty of this, nor can there be any guarantee of significant warning of the actual start of a coup. Moreover, periods of tension indicating the possibility might last for months.”⁵⁹

Winding Down in the Gulf

In the fall of 1968, the Chiefs of Staff issued a report on the anticipated Iraqi threat through the end of 1971 when UK forces would withdraw. They concluded that *any* form of Iraqi attack was unlikely as long as the Gulf remained stable elsewhere. Baghdad’s own internal tensions, the attitude of other Arab states, Kuwait’s international status, and the UK’s defense commitment would dissuade Iraq from invading its neighbor. Citing a JIC Assessment, the Chiefs of Staff still identified instability in Kuwait as a residual worry. The report pointed out that an Arab-Iran confrontation might trigger instability in Kuwait and increase the likelihood of an Iraqi attack. It concluded that the Kuwaiti ruling family should be able to control domestic opposition. In the unlikely event that the Sabahs were unable to suppress opposition and the Kuwaiti military had to quell serious unrest,

however, Iraq might be able to seize Kuwait using only forces stationed near Al Basrah, along with air support. Such a seizure might occur before the UK could intervene effectively. Once again, the intelligence warning was qualified: “Serious unrest in Kuwait should alert us to this possibility in time...[but] there is no guarantee of this.”⁶⁰

As of October 1968, Iraq still had only one infantry brigade and one tank battalion near the border with Kuwait that could make a swift attack along the lines of the “opportunistic” scenario. These units, however, could be supported by a growing air force. IL-28s and TU-16s operating from Habbaniyah (near Baghdad) and about 60 percent of Iraqi fighter force—as many as 229 fighters—could deploy to the Basrah-Zubayr area on short notice. On the ground, the growing Kuwaiti Air Force “should” be able to delay the attack, although the Chiefs of Staff characterized its defensive capability as “mediocre.” The Ministry of Defence ruled out the more daunting scenario—a full-scale attack by at least one

infantry division and an armored brigade—as long as Iraq’s problems in Kurdistan and Arab-Israeli tensions remained unsettled.⁶¹

By mid-1970, however, the JIC reported that the Iraqi military presence along the border with Kuwait had increased to one mechanized infantry brigade, two armored regiments (90 tanks), and “ample” artillery support. Some 70 ground attack fighters and nearly 60 air defense fighters along with 19 TU-16s and IL-28s represented the air threat. Kuwait, with two infantry brigades and one armored brigade, was judged likely to be hard pressed to stop even the “opportunistic” attack that British intelligence had envisioned.⁶² Despite these conclusions, indicators of imminent danger were not present and British troops left the Gulf in 1971 as planned.

Intelligence and Decisionmaking

The UK intelligence collection, analysis, and dissemination system allowed British forces to posture appropriately to counter threats of an Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Of key importance, UK leaders were predisposed to heed intelligence warnings. The Persian Gulf had long been on Whitehall’s watch list, because of UK oil interests and the legacy of decades of Britain’s indirect rule in the Gulf. London,

⁵⁹ Defence Planning Staff memo, “Military Assistance to Kuwait,” 17 March 1965 (DEFE 25 119); and Chiefs of Staff Committee, “British Military Assistance to Kuwait,” 30 June 1965 (DEFE 25 119).

⁶⁰ Appendix I to Annex A to COS “3 68, “The Threat and Capabilities of the Iraqi and Kuwaiti Forces,” 22 October 1968 (DEFE 11 617).

⁶¹ *Ibid.* Also, Internal Foreign Office memo from M. Weir, “Kuwait,” 20 April 1967, Records of Foreign and Commonwealth Office 8 627.

⁶² Assistant Chief of Defence Staff, Policy Minutes 70 189, 30 July 1970 (DEFE 31 40).

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for example, had considered sending troops to Kuwait in July 1958, when the Qasim coup occurred. In other words, the Middle East command was spring-loaded to enter Kuwait—with or without an Iraqi invasion—and was keenly attuned to intelligence reporting. The sudden change in Iraqi rhetoric toward Kuwait immediately after the Anglo-Kuwaiti exchange of letters in mid-1961 propelled UK decision-makers into action, despite the ambiguous HUMINT reports of limited force movements at the time.

The JIC's warning capabilities were handicapped by limited collection assets, but at the same time bolstered by the relatively straightforward ground warning

problem it faced in the Gulf. Assessing Baghdad's capabilities was not complicated: its army was militarily unready, static, tied down in providing internal security services, and eventually mired in protracted warfare in Kurdistan. Most force moves took place gradually, allowing British decisionmakers time to react. The UK warning construct remained relatively simple as long as few Iraqi units were located near Kuwait.

Gauging Baghdad's intentions was far more difficult, particularly

following the seizure of power by mercurial elites. Considering a bolt-from-the-blue scenario bereft of other indicators, the JIC was convinced that the handful of forces along the border could cross into Kuwait before detection. Also, analysts were not sanguine about their ability to warn of a Kuwaiti coup that might trigger such an invasion.

JIC Assessments in the 1960s appear to have enjoyed high credibility within the British military establishment. The warning timelines they provided were central to UK military planning to defend Kuwait for over a decade.