

The Wall Street Journal
Monday, January 28, 1991

Upping the Ante

Gulf Oil Spill Shows Iraq's Resolve to Wage War on Its Own Terms
Largest-Ever Slick Threatens Area Desalination Plants and May Hinder Allies
Saudis Are Caught Off Guard

By Barbara Rosewicz

The huge oil spill that Iraq unleashed in the Persian Gulf is Saddam Hussein's latest declaration that he is prepared to wage a long and unconventional war.

The spill, measuring 35 miles long and 10 miles wide, is already the largest in history and its consequences are likely to be graver than either Saudi Arabia or the U.S.-led forces are letting on. President Bush calls the Iraqi move a "last gasp" and U.S. military officials say the giant slick won't hinder military operations. But military planners also acknowledge that they will be forced to maneuver around the giant slick

Moreover, the black tide creeping down the Saudi coast could, within a week, temporarily shut down a significant portion of the kingdom's productions of drinking water and electricity. Those disruptions, in turn, could affect the efficiency of the military operations in Saudi Arabia, where most of the Allied forces are based.

In an effort to stop the spill, which is spewing from an off-shore Kuwaiti loading terminal, U.S. planes struck two pipeline installations in Kuwait feeding the terminal. U.S. military officials called the attack generally successful.

In Jubail, Saudi Arabia, home to the nation's largest desalination plant, people are already bracing themselves for the worst. The oil could begin washing up on the shoreline there by the end of the week.

"Everybody wants bottled water fast because of the oil," said Mohamad Tahir Khan, manager of a chain of grocery stores in the area. "Everyone is panicky." Mr. Khan told Wall Street Journal reporter Bob Davis that he sent a driver 60 miles south to Dammam to buy 500 cartons of water, but could only scavenge 100. Demand is so great, he said, the shipment will be sold out in "20 minutes."

Saudi officials insist the slick doesn't threaten their ability to produce drinking water or run coastal electrical plants, which use steam produced by the desalination process. But C.J. Green, a pollution control officer at Abu Dhabi National Oil Co., says that no amount of booms laid to protect the plants can assure that oil won't enter the system and ruin crucial desalination filters and pipes.

Other Tactics

Although Iraq denies it orchestrated the spill, the U.S. military is convinced Saddam Hussein is responsible. And that feeds the perception that the Iraqi leader intends to use every unconventional trick in his book to frustrate the U.S. and ensure that the war is eventually fought on Iraqi terms.

“He has a vast array of possibilities, and we should watch for those possibilities and be prepared for any of them,” Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf, commander of U.S. forces in Saudi Arabia, warned yesterday in the capital city of Riyadh.

Already, Saddam Hussein has attacked cities with missiles, set oil facilities afire in Kuwait and, now, unleashed a mammoth oil slick – all to stir chaos while avoiding direct contact with the technologically superior forces arrayed against him. He may also eventually make good on his threat to use terrorism and chemical and biological weapons. Moreover, he can wreak worse environmental havoc by spilling much more Kuwaiti crude into the sea and setting more Kuwaiti oil wells on fire, creating clouds of smoke over the country that could disrupt U.S. air operations. In an ominous radio broadcast over the weekend, Iraq warned that “the power the Iraqis have mustered to confront the U.S. and Zionist aggressors is not a conventional one....We also know well when to respond and when to use this power.”

Increasing Confidence

Iraq’s threats notwithstanding, Defense Department officials say there is growing confidence in the upper echelons of the Pentagon that the more conventional air war is going well. One top officer asserts that Saddam Hussein’s unconventional actions aren’t disrupting the overall war effort and that planners are confident the Allies will succeed in any ground attack.

The military’s sense of confidence, which Pentagon officials are downplaying in their public statements, has been heightened in recent days by the fact that Iraqi air defenses appear to be deteriorating rapidly, making it easier for Allied planes to fly missions. In addition, military planners are pleased that Iraqi fighter jets have been moving to Iran in recent days. The reason for the move isn’t clear, but it apparently leaves fewer aircraft to challenge U.S. forces.

Military officials say the Gulf oil slick began forming when Iraq dumped the contents of five Iraqi-flagged oil tankers into the water. The tankers had been docked since last fall outside the Mina al Ahmadi port in Kuwait. In addition, the Iraqis opened the spigot on the Sea Island oil-loading terminal about 10 miles off the Kuwaiti coast, U.S. officials said. Word of the slick didn’t reach the Allied command until last Friday.

By yesterday, the oil spill totaled an estimated five to 10 million barrels, or between 210 and 420 million gallons, according to a Saudi official. That is already far larger than the

record-setting 140 million gallon slick that spilled from the Ixtoc offshore well in the Gulf of Mexico in 1979 and 1980. It is also at least twenty times the size of the Exxon Valdez spill in 1989.

In an effort to stanch the flow of oil into the Gulf, an American F-111 fighter-bomber took off under the cover of darkness later Saturday night and dropped guided bombs on two onshore pipeline installations that control the flow of oil to the Sea Island terminal.

Gen. Schwarzkopf said there were signs the strikes had been successful. But he said it will take at least 24 hours to determine if the flow has been stopped because oil in 13 miles of pipeline leading to the offshore terminal continues to drain out. If the spill has been stopped, however, Iraq could find a way to start it up again. Industry experts say pumps can be jerry-rigged to renew the same flow, or tap into other Kuwaiti oil facilities. Meanwhile, a small part of the slick near the offshore terminal was on fire yesterday and continued to burn. Gen. Schwarzkopf said the blaze was inadvertently touched off when a U.S. warship earlier fired on a small Iraqi boat.

President Bush has dispatched a team of U.S., government experts to Saudi Arabia to consult on the slick. It was clear that, for their part, Saudi specialists were caught off guard by the size of the spill. Just a week, the kingdom's expert on computer simulations of oil spills, Ala Al-Rabeh, said his worst-case scenario for a spill involved only 21 million gallons – a tenth of what has gushed into the Gulf so far. The Saudi Arabian Oil Co. last week began calling manufacturers of oil-containment booms as far away as Vancouver, Canada: the company wants to buy 10 miles of booms, along with other equipment. Exxon Corp. was asked to send 100,000 feet of booms left over from its Alaska spill, an industry source said.

For the next few days at least, part of the war effort in the Gulf will focus on Jubail, a grimy industrial town where oil and water should never mix. Most critical are the two plants in Jubail that take water from the sea to produce fresh water for drinking and industrial use. Fully 90% of Riyadh's drinking water comes from the Jubail plants.

Projections are that prevailing north-westerly winds and the counter-clockwise current in the Gulf will nudge the slick straight down the Saudi coastline. According to a computer simulation done by Malcolm Spaulding, president of Applied Science Associates Inc., the slick will reach Jubail about midweek. Within 30 days, "we're showing that that section of the coast gets oiled and heavily oiled," he says.

In the path are the Jubail desalination plants, the Jubail industrial complex of petrochemical and fertilizer factories, a smaller drinking-water plant at al Khobar, power plants that produce 10% of the nation's electricity, the Saudis' two biggest oil-loading docks at Juaymah and Ras Tannurah and two huge refineries at Jubail and Ras Tannurah. All rely on cleansed water to operate, and oily water could foul the works.

"I feel sorry for Jubail," says Mr. Green, pollution control officer at Abu Dhabi National Oil Co., who worked many years in Saudi Arabia.

The desalination operations in Jubail look like power plants: Giant smoking stacks tower above them and big white holding tanks built into the desert surround them. The plants pull in salty water from inlets near the surface, and boil it into steam which then condenses as fresh water. The steam also turns big turbines that produce power for industry in the area and throughout Saudi Arabia.

Abdullah Al-Jholaikh, governor of the Saline Water Conversion Corp., which runs Saudi Arabia's municipal desalination plants, says the two Jubail plants are each protected by long, yard-thick booms for added protection, he says. But oil spill experts note that the booms may have only limited success, and that oil may still get through.

Bottled water was in short supply in the city even before reports of the oil spill. That's partly because of demand from Allied troops. But it's also because some truckers are afraid to make deliveries to Jubail, for fear of being on the road during Scud missile attacks. The fear of water shortages in the area is greatest among foreign workers, who hold most of the blue-collar jobs in this city. Several Saudis say they can drive 60 miles south to Damman to pick up water for their families, but that the foreign workers either don't own cars or can't get the necessary papers to make the trip.

"America, you started this war; now what do you do?" says a frustrated Raj Mana, an Indian grocery store clerk who works in Jubail. "In a few days, we'll have a big problem."

Outside experts tend to agree, despite Saudi insistence that the desalination operations aren't endangered. "It's not an easy operation" to protect the plants, says John Bennett, an environmental consultant who has worked on oil spills since the 1969 Santa Barbara, Calif., spill. "They'll lose a few facilities. They won't be successful on all of them."

So far, there's no sign of concern that front-line U.S. troops could be affected if the desalination plants are shut down. Troops near the front rely in large part on bottled water, and the military has in place movable water-treatment units. Farther back, however, the troops depend on Saudi water supplies.

At the very least, Saddam Hussein may be counting on creating public jitters about Gulf water supplies, thus adding to the political problems Allied leaders face in maintaining public support for the war. If he succeeds in shutting down some of Saudi Arabia's coastal plants, Saddam Hussein will have launched an act of industrial terrorism as successful as any string of bombings could have been.

Saddam "understands the impact of harming the water system and the synergistic effects on other operations, like refineries and petrochemical plants," says Edward Badolato, a Fairfax, Va., energy consultant with experience in the Mid-east.

In the Arab world, Saddam Hussein may be scoring points simply by complicating American military plans and prolonging the war. To many Arabs, the standard by which

Saddam Hussein will be judged will be the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, in which combined Arab armies lasted only six days against the far smaller, Israeli armed forces. By contrast, Iraq already has lasted twice as long against a big and sophisticated collection of Western and Arab armies.

“It’s not a bad calculation in terms of appealing” to Arab masses, says Richard Murphy, former assistant secretary of state for Middle Eastern affairs. “It’s all part of the image. He’s going to keep standing up and sticking his finger in our eye...Each day is further strengthening the image that Arab resistance can overcome anything.”

The effects of the spill on the environment, of course, will last long after the war is over. The impact of the oil on the shoreline may cause unprecedented damage to organisms at the base of the food chain and take a toll on birds, sea turtles and a variety of fish. The spill occurred just as sea birds arrived in the area on migrations from Europe and just as shrimp started spawning in seagrass beds and tidal channels along the Gulf Coast. Shrimp and fish support a fishing industry in the lower gulf.

The Persian Gulf “will survive,” says Mr. Bennett, the cleanup consultant. “But a slick this size could be around for a couple of years.”