

# ***Introduction***

In the wake of the 100-hour ground war against Iraq, the U.S. Army mounted the largest civil–military reconstruction operation since World War II in an effort to restore the shattered country of Kuwait. Never having faced a disaster of this magnitude, the Kuwaiti government simply could not provide for all of its own recovery needs. The U.S. Army played a critical role in rebuilding Kuwait and smoothing the fragile transition from hostilities to peace. Army soldiers and civilians conducted damage assessments, restored electrical power and water supplies, cleared tons of debris, and provided emergency medical care and other essential services. In doing so, they contributed significantly not only to the physical well-being of the Kuwaiti people but also to political and economic stability in the region.

The diffuse, complex Kuwait operation included four basic phases: planning, emergency response, recovery, and the aftermath. But these phases were not always neatly separated nor easily defined. Although the Secretary of Defense defined the emergency response phase as the first 90 days, the distinction between the emergency response phase and the recovery phase quickly became blurred. Sometimes the Army and its contractors made emergency repairs in one area, while more substantial, long-term repairs were undertaken elsewhere. The goal of emergency construction generally was to restore facilities and services to their pre-war condition, not to make improvements. Yet, in Kuwait, operators found that there was no clear definition of “emergency construction.” For example, did it mean boarding up windows rather than replacing the glass or clearing rubble from a building but not cleaning it? As the recovery proceeded, the expectations of the Kuwaitis understandably increased and the definition of “emergency repairs” expanded.

To further complicate matters, various agencies shaped and executed each phase. The planning phase, for example, was dominated by the Kuwait Emergency Recovery Program made up of Kuwaiti representatives, the 352d Civil Affairs Command and its Kuwait Task Force, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and its Kuwait Emergency Recovery Office. The 352d Civil Affairs Command focused on municipal functions such as the police and fire departments. It ultimately spent nearly half a

billion dollars of Kuwaiti money to get and keep government agencies running. The Corps' Kuwait Emergency Recovery Office, by contrast, dealt with facilities and the physical infrastructure such as power and sanitation facilities and the buildings that housed that infrastructure. It, too, spent just under half a billion dollars, mostly in contracts, to repair this physical infrastructure.

On the eve of the ground war against Iraq, the Army also created Task Force Freedom, made up primarily of civil affairs and various support elements, to help execute the emergency response. Meanwhile, back in Washington, the Army Staff created the Kuwait Recovery Task Force to coordinate emergency response and later recovery issues within the Pentagon.

As emergency repairs were completed and the operation gradually transitioned into a recovery phase, Task Force Freedom gave way to the newly created Defense Reconstruction Assistance Office representing the Secretary of Defense. The Corps of Engineers, through its Kuwait Emergency Recovery Office and its civilian contractors, continued to play a key role during both the emergency response and recovery phases. Finally, nearly a year after the liberation of Kuwait, most repairs to the civil infrastructure were complete, and the Defense Reconstruction Assistance Office closed. The focus then shifted to the reconstruction of Kuwait's military facilities, two air bases in particular. The Corps created the small Kuwait Program Office to administer this effort. Although the role of civil affairs diminished during the recovery phase, the role of the Corps of Engineers expanded.

Although over half a million American soldiers participated in the Persian Gulf War, relatively few were directly involved in the recovery operations. Most of the actual recovery work was done by Corps civilians and contractors. There were certainly areas where U.S. troops could have been more involved. For example, Army engineers could have been used to deliver water and clear debris, but they were not. Using civilian contractors let the military reduce the U.S. force in Kuwait and freed up U.S. troops for redeployment. Military and political leaders were anxious to redeploy American troops—many of whom had been stationed in the Persian Gulf for months—as quickly as possible. In addition, there was concern about how the Kuwaitis would view a prolonged presence of U.S. troops and how the American people would respond to televised images of American soldiers performing nonmilitary functions such as hauling trash.

The Kuwait recovery effort was much more than a humanitarian assistance mission. It was closely linked to U.S. strategic interests in the region. The United States had fought the Persian Gulf War, in part, as a

response to a major regional security threat to the world's oil supply. General Gordon R. Sullivan, Chief of Staff of the Army during much of the reconstruction, observed, "Economically, the [Middle East] region will remain of great importance to other regions of the world—particularly the West—because of their dependence on its energy resources."<sup>1</sup> Defense officials resisted taking on the recovery mission until they acknowledged these strategic interests; until they realized that although they had won a military victory, they could "lose" the peace.

The goal of the United States was to promote long-term political and social stability and economic recovery in Kuwait. U.S. policymakers were anxious to help the Kuwaiti government develop the capability to provide the infrastructure and institutions its citizens expected. Fulfilling those expectations, it was argued, would ensure the legitimacy of the government. This was not the first time that the United States had used humanitarian assistance to achieve its strategic goals. Nor was it the first time that policymakers in Washington had used civil-military construction as an instrument of foreign policy, particularly in the Middle East.

The Kuwait operation must be viewed within the framework of 50 years of U.S. presence in the region, specifically the Corps' large construction programs in Saudi Arabia and Israel. The Corps first became involved in Saudi Arabia in 1951 when it began building an airfield at Dhahran using U.S. Air Force funds. The involvement expanded dramatically after 1965 when the United States and Saudi Arabia signed an engineer assistance agreement in which the United States agreed to advise and assist the construction of certain military facilities for the Saudi Ministry of Defense and Aviation. The Corps worked on a fully reimbursable basis with the government of Saudi Arabia paying for all design and construction. Through its Middle East Division, created in 1976 and headquartered in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, the Corps managed design and construction programs that by the 1980s totaled an estimated \$14 billion. The Corps built many facilities that the U.S. military would use during the Persian Gulf War: Shaikh Isa Air Base in Bahrain, King Khalid Military City in northern Saudi Arabia, King Faisal Military Cantonment at Khamis Mushayt, King Abdulaziz Military Cantonment, and other air and navy bases.<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere in the region (as part of the Camp David Accords), between 1979 and 1982 the Corps constructed two ultramodern air bases in Israel's Negev Desert.<sup>3</sup>

Through these programs, governments in the region had come to know the Corps' work and respected its ability and responsiveness. They also purchased American military equipment creating a need for American construction and, as a side benefit, provided infrastructure that the United States could use in emergencies such as the Gulf War.

During that conflict, American planes could fly right in and use Saudi air bases because they had been built to U.S. specifications. The large and lengthy construction programs had created alliances, trust, and useable facilities and had given the United States valuable knowledge of the region and its construction needs and practices.

The Kuwait program had similarities to the Corps' previous work in the Middle East. As with the Israeli air base program, the Kuwait operation was characterized by a tight schedule, long supply lines, and nagging political pressures. But major differences also set the Kuwait program apart. Although the Israelis covered some of the cost of their air base program, it was funded, for the most part, by the United States. In this case, however, the Kuwaiti government paid the bills. Kuwaiti control of the funding presented some special challenges. Also, unlike the Israeli and Saudi programs, the Kuwait program was a complex series of projects that involved providing services as well as construction for both civil and military facilities. When the Corps arrived, most of the country's civilian work force had fled, and equipment and materials were desperately scarce. The pace of construction was faster than with any previous projects in the Middle East and certainly faster than normal military construction in the States. In the States, a typical military construction project takes five years from programming to construction. In Kuwait, where the Corps had contracts already in place, a similar project took just 30 days, though the standards and thus the final quality were somewhat lower for emergency construction.<sup>4</sup>

The Kuwait operation must also be viewed not only in the context of previous construction in the Middle East, but also in the framework of the American military's long history of humanitarian relief operations, both at home and abroad. Through the years, U.S. forces have been employed in noncombat uses. Soldiers helped combat malaria in Panama and cholera, hunger, and illiteracy in Cuba, Haiti, and Nicaragua. They also established schools, promoted public health, organized elections, and encouraged democracy in those countries. Closer to home, soldiers have repeatedly assisted victims of earthquakes, hurricanes, and other natural disasters since the 19th century.<sup>5</sup>

Rooted as it was in U.S. involvement in the region, the complicated, often remarkable recovery operation would have a lasting impact on U.S.-Kuwaiti relations and the political stability of the Middle East.