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Iraq - Kuwait (1990 - 1991)

Iraq invaded and annexed Kuwait on August 2, 1990. After months of diplomatic efforts through the United Nations, including the imposition of economic sanctions on Iraq, a 28-nation allied force led by the United States attacked Iraq on January 16, 1991. In the subsequent 43-day war, fought mostly from the air, an estimated 150,000 Iraqi soldiers were killed and the same number captured, while the allies suffered fewer than 150 combat casualties. The war's toll on Iraqi civilians was also significant as up to 3,000 died in the allied bombing and missile attacks on highways, bridges, and military installations in urban areas. Thousands more suffered from the destruction of water and sewage treatment plants and the country's electrical power infrastructure. The war also caused vast environmental damage, as Iraq released more than 10 million barrels of oil into the Persian Gulf and Iraqi troops withdrawing from Kuwait set oil installations on fire, adding to the fires caused by allied bombing.

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait did not come as a complete surprise to those who were following Saddam Hussein's public comments in the first half of 1990. On several occasions Iraq, in massive debt after its crippling eight-year war with Iran, criticized the Kuwaiti government, one of its major creditors, for exceeding its oil production quota set by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Saddam also referred to Iraq's historical claims on Kuwaiti territory. In the previous decade, Iraq had developed closer political and economic relations with the United States, which supported the regime in its war with Iran. Wary of damaging these relations, Saddam sounded out U.S. views prior to his invasion of Kuwait. In July, a U.S. State Department spokesperson said that the United States had no defense treaties with Kuwait, and the U.S. ambassador to Iraq told Saddam Hussein that the U.S. government had "no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts, like your border disagreement with Kuwait."

However, when Iraq invaded Kuwait, U.S. president George Bush vocally opposed the move. By the end of August, Bush was criticizing Saddam Hussein's human rights record and insisted that Iraq's actions were a threat to the sovereignty of nations everywhere. When diplomatic means failed to dislodge Iraq from Kuwait, U.S.-led coalition forces did so.

As the Gulf War ended, internal opponents of Saddam's regime launched uprisings in the north and south of the country, anticipating U.S. support. This support was not forthcoming, however, and Saddam's military killed large numbers of Shia Muslims in the south and Kurds in the north in its effort to regain control (see Iraq-Kurds and Iraq-Shia conflict profiles). After the war, the Bush administration and later the Clinton administration, continued to isolate the Iraqi regime. U.S. and British air raids over Iraqi territory helped to enforce a UN-imposed Iraqi no-fly zone, and UN economic sanctions against Iraq continued. The culmination of years of tensions came in 2003, when U.S. President George W. Bush led a war against Iraq that succeeded in overthrowing Saddam Hussein (see Iraq-US war profile).

Print Resources

Ridgeway, James (1991) *The March to War*. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows.

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Finlan, Alastair (2003) *The Gulf War 1991*. New York: Routledge.

Khadduri, Majid and Edmund Ghareeb (1997) *War in the Gulf, 1990 - 1991: The Iraq-Kuwait Conflict and its Implications*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Online Resources

Human Rights Watch (1991) *Needless Deaths in the Gulf: Civilian Casualties During the Air Campaign and Violations of the Laws of War*.

McLaren, Duncan and Ian Willmore (2003) "The Environmental Damage of War in Iraq," *The Observer* (London), 19 January.

BBC News. *In Depth: Saddam's Life and Times*.

Timeline

Aug. 1990 - Iraq invades and annexes Kuwait; United Nations, Arab League and governments condemn Iraq's actions; U.S. freezes Iraqi and Kuwaiti assets, sends warships to Persian Gulf, and secures Saudi permission to base troops on its territory

Sept. 1990 - USSR announces support for U.S. coalition against Iraq

Oct. 1990 - US amasses troops and equipment in Saudi Arabia

Nov. 1990 - 12th UN Security Council Resolution regarding Iraq since August sets a January 15, 1991 deadline for Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait, authorizes use of force against Iraq withdraw after that deadline

Jan. 1991 - Iraq misses 1/15/91 deadline; allies begin air war on Iraq and occupied Kuwait

Feb. 1991 - allies begin ground war; Iraqi forces withdraw from Kuwait

Mar. 1991 -Kurdish and Shia uprisings in the north and south quashed by Iraqi forces; UN sanctions, arms inspections, and no-fly zone continue