

The Gulf War, 1991

The Rise of Saddam Hussein

Saddam Hussein Abd al-Majid al-Tikriti was born April 28, 1937, in Al Awja, Iraq. He grew up in poverty, moving to Baghdad to live with his Uncle after the death of his father before he was born. Growing up, Saddam immersed himself in the anti-British, Arab nationalist ideology of the Ba'ath Party as early as 1957.¹ Around 1959, the party attempted to overthrow the current Prime Minister, who was seen as a corrupt figurehead. This attempt, however, failed and Saddam fled to Syria then, later, Egypt.² In Cairo he attended Law School and returned to Baghdad after the Ba'ath Party succeeded in taking over in 1963. Unfortunately for them, there was a counter-coup mere months later, and Saddam was jailed for many years. He later escaped and became a



leader in the Party, and was instrumental in their rise to power in 1968. Saddam worked closely with a distant relative, Hassan Al-Bakr, the newly installed Iraqi president and chairman of the Revolutionary Council. Saddam's policies focused heavily on the industrialization of oil, a lucrative commodity in the Middle East, and the "purifying" of the Government of its enemies and dissidents. In 1979 Saddam took open control of the government, forcing Bakr to resign and taking his position. Saddam continued to suppress all internal opposition and began to form a "cult of personality" among his people, including building statues of himself and putting portraits of him all over Iraqi towns and streets.³ These actions were modeled on Stalin in the Soviet Union or leaders in North Korea. All in all, Saddam established himself as a dictator to be feared, who controlled absolutely, and ruled with an oily, iron fist.



Interest in Expansion

Over the course of his rule, Saddam made it clear he envisioned Iraq as the superpower of the Middle East, starting by opposing Egypt, the region's leader in the 1960s.⁴ Two factors played large roles in Saddam's decision to become an aggressor nation: oil and military power. Oil is a very valuable energy source, used in cars, factories, and many types of machinery. Most natural

¹ "Saddam Hussein." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. www.britannica.com/biography/Saddam-Hussein.

² "Bios Saddam Hussein." *Sky HISTORY, HISTORY CHANNEL*. www.history.co.uk/biographies/saddam-hussein#:~:text=Saddam%20Hussein%20has%20the%20dubious,nationalist%20ideology%20of%20the%20day.

³ "The Complex Legacy of Saddam Hussein." *Imperial War Museums, IWM*. www.iwm.org.uk/history/the-complex-legacy-of-saddam-hussein.

⁴ "Bios Saddam Hussein." *Sky HISTORY, HISTORY CHANNEL*.

oil is found across the Middle East, creating a large center of political power in the region. For example, in 1973, the Arab members of OPEC, including Iraq, placed an embargo on the U.S. in response to its support of Israel in the Yom Kippur War. The result was an oil shortage across America and a subsequent economic crisis. The oil embargo caused oil prices in the United States to quadruple from \$2.90 a barrel before to \$11.65 during it.⁵ The embargo was lifted in 1974 but increased oil prices led to worldwide economic issues as the United States tried, and largely failed, to stimulate its own domestic oil production.⁶ The economic shocks from the oil shortage saw a slowdown in global gross domestic product (GDP).⁷ Oil prices later fell in the mid-1980s, resulting in the increased importation of Middle Eastern oil, thoroughly demonstrating the power and hold that region had on the market.⁸

Iraq under Saddam became a large military power. On September 22, 1980, Saddam held a deep desire to control oil producing regions in Iran and to take over disputed border lands from the nation. As such, Iraqi armed forces launched a surprise invasion into western Iran along the joint border, though Iraq claimed they were reacting to previous Iranian aggression.⁹ This began an 8-year conflict between the nations, involving heavy use of ballistic missiles and resulted in large numbers of casualties. Iraq, despite having the element of surprise, did not have the troop numbers nor the weapons to fight Iran effectively. On the flip side, Iran did not want to fight a war, and with a demoralized army efficient deployment was an issue, so the war was mostly a stalemate. As it dragged on, the Iraq-Iran war was notable for the use of chemical weapons and the attacks on oil tankers, severely reducing the oil-exporting capacity of both nations.¹⁰ Iraq



found support in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and later found aid from the United States. The war ended in a cease fire and an accepted United Nations Resolution in 1988. The most important result of this conflict was that Iraq now had the fourth largest army in the world by the late 1980s.¹¹ With this newfound power, would Saddam continue his quest for Middle Eastern domination?

Oil

One of the Iraqi government's main interest for entering these conflicts was oil. Looking at Kuwait, the nation holds the seventh largest known oil-reserves in the world.¹² If

⁵ "Oil Shock of 1973-74." *Federal Reserve*. https://www.federalreservehistory.org/essays/oil_shock_of_1973_74.

⁶ "How an Oil Shortage in the 1970s Shaped Today's Economic Policy." *MARKETPLACE*. www.marketplace.org/2016/05/31/how-oil-shortage-1970s-shaped-todays-economic-policy/.

⁷ "Past oil price shocks: Political background and economic impact Evidence from three cases." *Swiss Federal Institute of Technology*. https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/20499/rev%20Oil_Price_ShocksI.pdf.

⁸ "Energy Crisis (1970s)." *History.com*. www.history.com/topics/1970s/energy-crisis.

⁹ "Iran-Iraq War." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. www.britannica.com/event/Iran-Iraq-War.

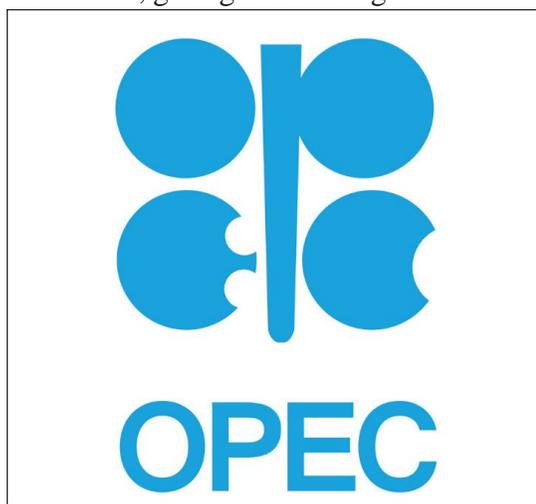
¹⁰ *Ibid*.

¹¹ "Operation Desert Storm." *Ushistory.org*. www.ushistory.org/us/60a.asp.

¹² "These 15 countries, as home to largest reserves, control the world's oil." *USA Today*. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2019/05/22/largest-oil-reserves-in-world-15-countries-that-control-the-worlds-oil/39497945/>.

Iraq conquered Kuwait, the Iraqi government would, at that time, be in control of about twenty percent of the global oil supply.¹³ The economic implications of controlling such a large portion of the world's oil supply are obvious—it would immediately give Saddam Hussein the ability to exert a large control on the price of oil and cause economic harm to individual countries or the global economy. Additionally, controlling such quantities of oil would give the Iraqi government the necessary resources to build a larger, more technologically advanced military, potentially giving it the ability to conquer even more countries in the region. In the event of such conflicts, the Iraqi government could choose to reduce oil exports making it more difficult for other countries to fuel their own military equipment (ships, airplanes, tanks, etc.). Many nations in the Middle East are built on oil, and given how countries rely on it for transportation, electricity generation, waging military conflicts, etc., it's no wonder why tensions in the Middle East can be so high.

Saudi Arabia is considered to have the largest oil reserves, giving them a large hold over the price of oil internationally, and a large say in its regulation. This is largely due to the geography of Saudi Arabia, being a larger nation with more natural resources. Iraq, on the other hand, was smaller, yet one of the first Middle Eastern nations to really develop their oil fields through nationalization. In 1979, Iraq's oil production stood at four million barrels a day, standing in third place behind Iran and Saudi Arabia.¹⁴ Gaining more land from another oil producing nation could give Iraq the edge it needs to lead discussions in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) over Saudi Arabia, and to earn additional revenue by potentially monopolizing the oil trade.



Middle Eastern Tensions

The Middle East is a region of tenuous relations. A combination of European intervention, civil war, and economic power has led to a complicated web of regional relations. The most relevant regional disputes involve Iraq's enemies, and each nation's stance on Israel. Iraq and Iran are not on friendly terms, yet they do have a cease fire agreement. During the Iran-Iraq war, Iraq found support from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, yet these countries supported Iraq due to a fear of Iran, rather than trust and mutual acceptance. Saudi Arabia's and Kuwait's relationship with Iraq can be seen as less of a partnership, and more of an agreement made out of desperation.¹⁵ Also concerning is that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Kuwait have had increased tensions with Iraq due to arguments about oil production. Saddam blamed the UAE and Kuwait for decreasing oil prices by producing more oil. Lower oil prices seriously harmed Iraq's economy as its economy was wholly dependent on exporting oil. These tensions were mitigated to some degree

¹³ "Iraq invades Kuwait." *History Channel*. <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/iraq-invades-kuwait>.

¹⁴ "Iraq's Oil Center: Past, Present, and Future." *Baker Institute for Public Policy*. www.bakerinstitute.org/media/files/page/97579f52/noc_iraq_jaffe.pdf.

¹⁵ "How Iraq's Relationship with Iran Shifted after the Fall of Saddam Hussein." *The Conversation*. www.theconversation.com/how-iraqs-relationship-with-iran-shifted-after-the-fall-of-saddam-hussein-129736.

at a 1989 OPEC Meeting, wherein Iraq, supported by Libya, argued to raise prices. Eventually, the disagreement over oil prices were mediated by Venezuela and Iran.¹⁶

But tensions between Iraq and other Middle Eastern countries do not just center on oil issues. Saddam Hussein took loans from Kuwait and the UAE during the Iraq-Iran War and owed \$37 billion in 1990.¹⁷ He claimed that he should not have to pay these loans back as Iraq was protecting Kuwait and the UAE from Iranian aggression. Despite these claims, Kuwait and the UAE, already wealthy countries at the time, refused to forgive his loans. Beyond tensions over loans, Kuwait and Iraq have lingering tensions from the early 1970s, when Iraq occupied large areas of Kuwait in a failed bid for power. Israel has often been a large point of contention in the Middle East. As it stood at this time, no Middle Eastern nation recognized Israel, but instead supported Palestine's claim to statehood and control over areas currently governed by Israel. Iraq's recent aggressions have placed it in hot water with many countries in the Middle East, including Iraq's other major-power rival, Egypt. Will the bonds of Middle East breakdown amid such high tensions?

The United States and International Allies



Of Iraq's international allies, none is more powerful than the Soviet Union (USSR). This relationship stems from trade deals that led Iraq to be a major oil exporter to the Soviet Union. However, as the USSR struggles with its own economic issues, will it support the continued aggression of Iraq? This naturally puts Iraq in opposition to the United States, which has oil deals with Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.¹⁸ The United States' loyalty towards Israel has also soured most relations between Iraq and the West.

During the period of oil price reduction in the late-1980s, Iraq blamed the United States and Israel for supposedly masterminding a plan to reduce oil prices, thus hurting Iraq's economy. The current Bush administration has tried to maintain stable economic and political relations with Iraq, and on April 12, 1990, the United States sent a delegation of American senators led by Senator Robert Dole to meet with Hussein. Dole brought a message suggesting that the United States wanted to improve relations with Iraq. A letter from President Bush to Saddam delivered by U.S. Ambassador Gaspie echoed this sentiment.¹⁹

Media Presence

As demonstrated during the Vietnam War, media coverage plays a powerful role in shaping public opinion. Even at the dawn of the 1990s, Journalists from all over the world could report and view major wars and battles. It is important for this crisis that every nation takes into consideration what news sources can be found in the Middle East, and how intervention can be played to each nation's public. Is it better to stop a great evil but failing to have a positive and supportive power base? Or is it better to keep the countries of the world stable by avoiding the horrible reality of war?

¹⁶ "Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait-International Response." *Stanford University*.

www.web.stanford.edu/group/tomzgroup/pmwiki/uploads/3957-1990-08-KS-a-IEM.pdf.

¹⁷ "The Gulf War, 1991." *U.S. Department of State*. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1989-1992/gulf-war>.

¹⁸ "Operation Desert Storm." *Ushistory.org*.

¹⁹ "The Gulf War, 1991." *U.S. Department of State*. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1989-1992/gulf-war>.

Questions to Consider

- What role has oil played in shaping the region's politics?
- To what extent are countries vulnerable to Iraq controlling a larger amount of global oil production?
- To what degree can tensions be reduced through negotiation and conversation?
- How has Iraq's economic dependence on oil exports contributed to its antagonistic foreign policy towards neighboring nations?