

The Road to Invasion: Analyzing the Forces Behind Iraq's Invasion of Kuwait

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ABSTRACT

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait was largely prompted by Saddam Hussein and the Baathist party's long-standing claim over Kuwait combined with Iraq's desperate need for wealth to rectify the country's economic crisis after the Iran-Iraq war. Additionally, the invasion can be seen as Hussein's hubristic, direct attempt to establish Iraq as the hegemon of the Arab world in a new post-Cold War era. The disputes leading up to the invasion highlight how Iraq's deep-rooted territorial claims and the Kuwaiti government's refusal to surrender control of disputed territories, led to increasing tensions and hostilities between the two countries. Kuwait's refusal to surrender to Saddam Hussein's economic demands surrounding Iraq's debt to Kuwait and oil exports, angered Hussein leading him to take drastic measures to repair the Iraqi economy. Invading Kuwait offered a direct solution to Iraq's economic crisis and the brewing prominent, domestic resentment at the mismanagement of the distribution of Iraqi finances. Hussein's overconfidence in Iraq's military capabilities and naivete led him to develop a warped perception of the U.S. resolve to defend Kuwait. His past failures made him desperate, leading him to take the considerable risk of invading Kuwait. The decision to invade Kuwait was influenced by many factors. Saddam Hussein's misjudgements led to a humiliating loss which worsened the economic climate in Iraq. International sanctions severely limited Iraq's trade, making it more difficult to rebuild the extensive infrastructure destroyed by the invasion. Ultimately, the invasion contributed to political instability in Iraq which lay the groundwork for the Iraq war.

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait was largely prompted by Saddam Hussein and the Baathist party's long-standing claim over Kuwait combined with Iraq's desperate need for wealth to rectify the country's economic crisis after the Iran-Iraq war. Additionally, the invasion can be seen as Hussein's hubristic, direct attempt to establish Iraq as the hegemon of the Arab world in a new post-Cold War era.

The renewal of Iraq's territorial claims over Kuwait made by Saddam Hussein severely strained relations between the two countries and served as a contributing factor for the subsequent Iraqi invasion. Iraq and Kuwait have a long history of territorial disputes, ranging from minor border disagreements to Iraq's full-scale claims over Kuwait. In 1961, the U.K. withdrew its presence in Kuwait and granted Kuwaiti independence. Iraq's Prime Minister at the time, Abd Al-Karim Qasim, threatened to assert sovereignty over Kuwait, claiming that it was an "integral part of Iraq" due to its historical inclusion in the Ottoman province of Al-Basrah. After Hussein and his Baathist party came into power they reignited the historic claim that Kuwait rightly belonged to Iraq. From 1973 to 1988, the Iraqi government issued several statements demanding that Kuwait cede control of the Bubiyan and Warbah Islands to Iraq. The Kuwaiti government continually refused these demands. Iraq was highly interested in the islands because of the secure access they provided to its ports on the waterway to the Persian Gulf which remained the only alternative to the closed Shatt Al-'Arab river (Abidi 138-142). After the Iran-Iraq war, relations between the Iraqi government and the al-Sabahs, the Kuwaiti ruling family, quickly worsened. The two governments were unable to resolve border demarcation issues. This led Hussein to develop a hostile attitude towards the al-Sabahs. During the invasion, Hussein demanded the surrender of the palaces of the Emir and the Crown Prince. According to an eyewitness in Kuwait, during the invasion, "Iraqis helped promote a state of anarchy, presumably, at least in part, to give the impression of

a revolution against the ruling Sabah family” (Ghabra 114). The Baathist regime banned all private and public references to the Sabah dynasty in Kuwait, during the invasion (Sasoon 612). The disputes leading up to the invasion highlight how Iraq’s deep-rooted territorial claims and the Kuwaiti government’s refusal to surrender control of disputed territories, led to increasing tensions and hostilities between the two countries. These hostilities culminated in the invasion, where Iraq overran Kuwait with excessive violence and brutality in order to erase the image of Kuwait under the al-Sabahs’ rule.

Kuwait’s refusal to surrender to Saddam Hussein’s economic demands surrounding Iraq’s debt to Kuwait and oil exports, angered Hussein leading him to take drastic measures to repair the Iraqi economy. The Iran-Iraq war was largely financed through loans. By 1990, Iraq owed around \$37 billion to Gulf creditors and had become a net debtor nation, despite the government’s attempts to promote the private sector and domestic agriculture. Hundreds of thousands of demobilized soldiers were unemployed and Iraq’s farmland was heavily damaged by salinization. The fall in world oil prices compounded Iraq’s economic crisis. (Sasson 610). Hussein argued that the loans should be seen as compensation for Iraq’s defense of the Arabian Peninsula from Iranian expansionism, but Kuwait and the UAE rejected Hussein’s debt-forgiveness demands. Additionally, Hussein accused the two Gulf states of violating the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries production quotas by over-producing petroleum for export which lowered prices and stripped Iraq of vital oil revenues. Hussein also charged Kuwait with “direct aggression” against Iraq and with stealing oil from the Rumaila oil field which was located along the Iraq-Kuwait border (Halliday 225-227). This prompted Hussein’s to voice military threats against Kuwait, a rich, but militarily weak country. At the Arab League summit, on May 30, 1990, Hussein issued a strong warning opposing the lowering of oil prices, specifically targeting Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, saying “We tell our brothers who do not want war . . . [that] bringing down oil prices is no different from launching a war against Iraq.” (Sasson 610) The acquisition of the Kuwaiti oil wells, assets and investments by Iraq would undoubtedly have a significant, positive impact on Iraq’s economy. The Kuwaiti oil fields are some of the largest and most lucrative in the world. By acquiring these assets Iraq would greatly increase its oil production and export capacity, in turn, generating crucial revenue. Invading Kuwait offered a direct solution to Iraq’s economic crisis and the brewing prominent, domestic resentment at the mismanagement of the distribution of Iraqi finances.

Saddam Hussein’s egotistical desire to establish the Baathist regime as a powerful one, after failed previous attempts, blinded him to the likely stern response that the West would have to the invasion of Kuwait. Hussein was intent on legitimizing the Baathist regime by improving Iraq’s international standing which relied on gaining foreign policy successes. During the 1970s, Iraq attempted to become the leader of Arab radicalism. Hussein launched the October War on Israel, which resulted in additional Syrian loss of territory. Saddam anticipated that pan-Arab and pan-Islamic sentiment would lead to a widespread Islamic revolution, but this belief ultimately proved untrue. Following the Arab-Israeli wars, Hussein once again failed to emerge as a regional superpower after he lost the Iran-Iraq war (Halliday 225-27). Hussein failed to recognize the implications of a newly unipolar world on Gulf politics and although he feared U.S. influence in Iraq, he called the U.S. bluff on their warnings towards Iraq’s military threats against Kuwait. After the communist regimes in Eastern Europe fell as result of the Cold War waning, there was a lot of discussion about the possible westernization and gradual transitions to democratic governments in the Gulf. Although Iraq received aid and military assistance from the U.S. in the past, Hussein became suspicious of American intentions in the Middle East. He started to openly criticize the U.S., calling for the removal of their troops from the Gulf, campaigning for an Arab economic boycott of the U.S., and accusing the U.S. of being behind Kuwait’s decreased oil prices. He continued to distrust the U.S.’s statements, even after the Bush administration made the decision to increase U.S. force presence. The U.S. also passed a U.N. resolution which permitted using military force to push Iraq out of Kuwait. After a grace period passed, the U.S. led an international coalition and within 24 hours liberated Kuwait of Iraqi occupation (“Chronology of Events”). Hussein’s overconfidence in Iraq’s military capabilities and naivete led him to develop a warped perception of the U.S. resolve to defend Kuwait. His past failures made him desperate, leading him to take the considerable risk of invading Kuwait.

The decision to invade Kuwait was influenced by many factors. Saddam Hussein's misjudgments led to a humiliating loss which worsened the economic climate in Iraq. International sanctions severely limited Iraq's trade, making it more difficult to rebuild the extensive infrastructure destroyed by the invasion. Ultimately, the invasion contributed to political instability in Iraq which lay the groundwork for the Iraq war.

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