

Chronic Conflict: A Case Study of Iraq

Part 2: Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the 1990-1991 Gulf War

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On 2 August 1990 Iraq invaded Kuwait; six days later Saddam Hussein announced the annexation of the small Gulf state as an Iraqi province. Within a week of the invasion, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) passed resolution 661, condemning the invasion and imposing sanctions on Iraq. On 29 November the Security Council passed resolution 678, which gave Iraq until 15 January 1991 to withdraw its forces. Should Iraq fail to do this, resolution 678 authorised member states to use 'all necessary means' to restore Kuwaiti sovereignty.¹ By 16 January Iraqi troops remained in Kuwait and a day later an international coalition led by the United States (US) commenced 'Operation Desert Storm'. The allied campaign lasted roughly six weeks; on 28 February 1991 President George H. W. Bush declared an end to the fighting and the successful liberation of Kuwait. Why after eight years of war with Iran did the Hussein regime decide to invade Kuwait? And what were the implications of the conflict in terms of human security?

Motives for the invasion

One of the most important factors behind the Hussein regime's decision to invade was the state of the Iraqi economy following the Iran-Iraq war. In 1980 prior to the outbreak of war with Iran, Iraq had a foreign currency reserve of \$35 billion; by the end of the 1980s Iraq had accumulated foreign debt of roughly \$80 billion, or approximately double its Gross National Product. The estimated cost of reconstruction following the war was \$230 billion. As one author put it, '[e]ven if one adopted the most optimistic (and highly unrealistic) assumption that every dollar of oil revenues would be directed to the reconstruction effort, it would have

taken nearly two decades to repair the total damage'.²

Such economic hardship, combined with Hussein's brutal oppression of Kurdish and shi'a groups made popular uprisings to overthrow him a real risk. The Hussein regime needed a fast solution. Two of Iraq's main benefactors in the war with Iran were Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Hussein requested that Iraq be relieved of large amounts of its debt to these countries, for having fought off the threat from Iran. Iraq even sought an Arab equivalent of the Marshall Plan from the Arab League.³ These claims were rejected.

The Hussein regime knew that if oil prices were high this would enable them to begin recovering from the war with Iran more quickly. Another strategy was hence to call on Gulf States to restrict their production of oil, which would limit supply and keep the price high on the global market. Kuwait and UAE ignored this request and continued to produce oil in abundance, meaning that the price per barrel was far lower than what Iraq needed it to be.

Finally, Iraq had historical grievances⁴ with Kuwait, which were exacerbated by suspicions that Kuwait was directly stealing its oil by way of 'slant drilling' across the border at the al-Rumaila oil field.

The Iraqi military was enormous in the early 1990s and conquering tiny Kuwait was initially quick and easy. An international coalition, however, was not prepared to let the invasion stand. Western and Arab states, that had only recently expended vast resources supporting Iraq against Iran, now found themselves at war with their erstwhile ally.

Impact on Iraq and the region

To some the Gulf war was a resounding success. The economic and human costs of the war were, however,

¹ UNSC, Security Council Resolutions <http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/678> Accessed 1 October 2014.

² E Karsh (2002).

³ The Marshall Plan refers to the US policy to provide aid to European states to support their reconstruction in the aftermath of the Second World War.

⁴ Territories in modern Kuwait were historically linked to the Ottoman province of Basra (now part of Iraq). Iraq therefore claimed Kuwaiti territory at various intervals in the 20th Century.

huge. While civilian deaths from the initial bombing campaign were relatively low (at least by the standards of other major armed conflicts), the damage to Iraqi infrastructure by aerial bombardments eventually led to a civilian death toll of 111,000, of which 70,000 were children under 15.⁵ Significant damage was done to power plants, health facilities and other important infrastructure. This meant that basic commodities such as clean water and simple medicines were in short supply, leading to a public health crisis:

“[N]othing that we had seen or read had quite prepared us for the particular form of devastation which has now befallen the country. The recent conflict had wrought near-apocalyptic results upon what had been, until January 1991, a rather highly urbanized and mechanized society. Now, most means of modern life support have been destroyed or rendered tenuous. Iraq has, for sometime to come, been relegated to a pre-industrial age, but with the disabilities of post-industrial dependency on an intensive use of energy and technology.”⁶

Sanctions

Comprehensive economic sanctions compounded the destruction wrought upon Iraq’s infrastructure. UNSC resolutions 661, 678 and 986 covered the main provisions of the sanctions regime. They were initially intended to compel Saddam Hussein to withdraw his forces from Kuwait and later to prevent Iraq from

⁵ Center for Economic and Social Rights, *Costs and Consequences of War in Iraq* < [http://www.cesr.org/downloads/ Costs%20and %20Consequences%20of%20War%20in%20Iraq. pdf](http://www.cesr.org/downloads/Costs%20and%20Consequences%20of%20War%20in%20Iraq.pdf)> Accessed 2 October 2014.

⁶ Representative of UN mission to Iraq cited in S Rawaf and D Rawaf ‘Public Health in Crisis: Iraq’ in S Jabbour et al (eds.), *Public Health in the Arab World*, (2012) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 332.

re-arming. However, the sanctions had a devastating effect on Iraq’s civilian population. Iraq’s economy



An Iraqi mother and child at a health clinic. Sanctions caused a severe increase in child mortality rates. (Source: BBC)

was highly dependent on the export of oil, which the sanctions placed tight restrictions on.

This caused a huge breakdown of economic activity, such that, for example, food was scarce, unemployment soared and the value of Iraq’s currency plummeted. Some estimates of the number of people who died as a result of these sanctions reach as high as 1.5 million, with more than 500,000 being children.⁷

The sanctions remained in place until the 2003 invasion of Iraq and left a terrible legacy of human insecurity and suffering, from which Iraq still has not recovered. For example, the infrastructural damage and blockade of imports gave way to more intangible effects, such as reduced levels of public education, psychological trauma and loss of investor confidence. These problems precipitated further deterioration in health, social, economic and political terms and may take generations to resolve.

⁷ A Alnasrawi ‘Iraq: Economic Sanctions and Consequences’, (2001), *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 22 (2), pp. 205-218.



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