



## The Rise of Saddam Hussein

This is a transcript of the [Rise of Saddam Hussein](https://www.mrallsophistory.com) podcast from [www.mrallsophistory.com](https://www.mrallsophistory.com)

Saddam Hussein became President of Iraq in 1979, a position he held until he was captured and imprisoned by American forces in 2003. This podcast will explore how Saddam came to power, with the next podcast in this series examining how he maintained his rule.

When he was 20 years old, Saddam Hussein joined the Ba'ath Party, whose ultimate aim was to unite all the Arab states in the Middle East. This ideology is known as Arab Nationalism, and to an extent it drove Saddam's early actions. Having failed in 1959 to assassinate a previous President who opposed Arab Nationalism, Saddam was one of the leading figures in a bloodless but successful Ba'athist coup in 1968. The coup led to Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr becoming Iraq's president, while Saddam was appointed as his Vice-President.

To understand how Saddam moved from the position of Vice-President to President, it's important to have a good understanding of how he built and consolidated his power during the 1970s. This part of the syllabus focuses on the reasons for Saddam's rise to power, and so to do well you need to be able to explain a range of different factors. Similar to other dictators you may have studied, Saddam combined different policies to secure his position. His ruthless systems of terror and repression ran alongside social and economic policies that gained him a lot of popular support. You need to be able to give specific and detailed examples of each, and that's what this podcast will help you with.

It's firstly important to remember that Saddam could not have successfully implemented any policies as Vice-President without first establishing a strong power base within government. He did this by ensuring that the most important positions in the government and military were given to his friends and relatives from his hometown in the area of Tikrit. To keep the army on his side, Saddam also provided them with a large defence budget to enable them to buy and develop modern weapons – including chemical weapons.

To ensure the population did not oppose the ruling Ba'ath Party, various parts of Iraqi society were brought under its control, and membership of important clubs and institutions was usually decided based on whether you were a member of the party or not. However, Saddam didn't only secure support through underhand means. He oversaw the nationalisation – or government takeover – of Iraq's oil industry in 1972, which led to a dramatic improvement in the economy. Just a year later, in 1973, Iraq joined with the other Arab oil-producing states in OPEC (an international organisation that coordinates petroleum policy) to reduce production and – in some cases – stop exports of oil to Western countries as punishment for supporting Israel in the Yom Kippur war. The subsequent shortage of oil pushed up the price of a barrel of oil by 400 per cent, meaning that Iraq's income rocketed.



A lot of the money now flooding into the Iraqi economy was used by Saddam to invest in the country's infrastructure. The country's road, water and power infrastructure benefited from a significant increase in spending, but the most notable spending was on education and healthcare. The government's establishment of free universal education meant that hundreds of thousands of Iraqis were educated to unprecedented levels in the years that followed the establishment of the "National Campaign for the Eradication of Illiteracy". Furthermore, enormous investment in healthcare meant that Iraq had one of the best healthcare systems in the Middle East, for which Saddam was presented with an award by UNESCO. Iraq was modernising at a dramatic pace, and by the end of the 1970s the number of Iraqis who were rural peasants had declined significantly as people moved to the modern cities. The level of investment that directly impacted ordinary Iraqis won Saddam huge popular support, and also ensured that he had the backing of the new class of businessmen who worked within the industries that were being developed.

However, behind the social improvements and political manoeuvring there was a violent system of repression. Saddam played a major role in creating a state security apparatus that kept a close watch on the Iraqi population. The People's Army was responsible for internal security, although it was actually the paramilitary wing of the Ba'ath Party. Consequently they were able to ensure that other elements of the Iraqi military were unable to oppose the government. Furthermore, anybody who disagreed with the party would find themselves arrested by the secret police – known as the Department of General Intelligence or the Mukhabarat – that frequently used torture, rape and assassination to intimidate and remove enemies of the state. Saddam's control over the appointment of positions in the security services also meant that the recruits were supporters of him as an individual, meaning that by the time the President resigned in 1979 the only feasible replacement was Saddam himself.

It's important to remember that Saddam Hussein did not become President of Iraq for just one reason. His influence within the Ba'ath party, support from the population, and his use of terror and repression against enemies, all contributed in one way or another. To do well in the exam, you need to be able to give specific examples for each of these factors and explain how each one affected his rise to power.