



Origins of the First Gulf War

This is a transcript of the [Origins of the First Gulf War](#) podcast from www.mrallsophistory.com

The trigger for the Gulf War was Iraq invasion of Kuwait on the 2nd August, 1990. However, its origins can be traced back many years to the period of British control of the Middle East. Iraq and Kuwait had both been ruled by Britain for nearly half a century. When they left Kuwait in 1961, Iraq immediately claimed control but was forced to recognise Kuwait's independence in 1963.

This long-term tension lay simmering under the surface for many years, yet began to seep out into the open following the Iran-Iraq War. To fund the war effort, Saddam Hussein had been forced to borrow \$80 billion from allies and neighbours, so was left with crippling debts. \$14 billion dollars of this money was owed to its small neighbour Kuwait.

The post-war economy did little assist Iraq's economic recovery as the worldwide price of oil was low due to an oversupply. This meant that Iraq's economy, which relied on oil exports, suffered significantly, with some economists calculating that Iraq lost up to \$14 billion a year between 1985 and 1989. Iraq had tried to get the OPEC, who controlled oil production, to reduce production in order to try to increase prices but they refused. Saddam accused Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates of producing more than their quota and consequently lowering the global price of oil due to oversupply. Furthermore, Saddam accused Kuwait of so called 'slant-drilling' to steal oil from the Iraqi-controlled portion of the Rumalia oil field that lay on their shared border.

Although diplomatic talks between Iraq and Kuwait began in July 1990, during which Kuwait promised to reduce their production, the talks soon broke down. Later that month Saddam met with April Glaspie, the United States Ambassador to Iraq, where she told the Iraqi leader that the USA had no interest in the Iraq-Kuwait dispute and would not get involved. This effectively gave Saddam the green light to invade, although a last-ditch attempt to reach an agreement took place on August 1st when representatives from the two nations met in Saudi Arabia. Iraq demanded that Kuwait pay \$10 billion in compensation for lost revenues but Kuwait offered \$9 billion. This again failed to resolve the dispute, and Iraq invaded Kuwait the next day on the 2nd August 1990.

Shortly after midnight on the 2nd August, the Iraqi invasion began when approximately 300,000 military personnel began moving in to Kuwait to take on their comparatively tiny military of 16,000 men. Despite months of threats from Iraq, the invasion still caught the Kuwaitis by surprise and Kuwait City had fallen under Iraqi control by the end of the day. Another two days of fighting defeated the remaining military resistance, with surviving Kuwaiti forces and military equipment evacuated to neighbouring Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.



Saddam installed a puppet government to rule Kuwait before annexing it to Iraq. Unwilling to live under Iraqi rule, approximately 400,000 Kuwaitis and thousands of other foreign nationals fled the country. India alone flew 488 flights over a two-month period to evacuate almost 112,000 Indian civilians, making it the largest civilian evacuation in history.

The invasion of Kuwait was the catalyst for the Gulf War that began a few months later. However, it's important to remember that the invasion of Kuwait was not the Gulf War. A question might focus on one or both of these events, so you need to remember that the invasion of Kuwait was a cause of the Gulf War but that the invasion of Kuwait had its own causes.

International condemnation of the invasion of Kuwait was immediate and far-reaching. Even France, which had traditionally been on good terms with Iraq, called for Saddam to withdraw his forces. The United Nations Security Council passed a resolution condemning the invasion, and the Arab League similarly passed a resolution calling for the Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait.

A few days later, when it became clear that Saddam was not going to remove his troops, further resolutions were passed by the UN. Resolutions 661 and 665 put in place complete economic sanctions against Iraq and also authorised a naval blockade to enforce the sanctions and stop Iraq trading with any other country.

In response, Saddam said that he would withdraw his troops from Kuwait as long as Israel withdrew from occupied territories in Palestine, Syria and Lebanon. This won Saddam support from the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, but did little to improve the situation. By linking the occupation of Kuwait to the Arab-Israeli conflict, Saddam also hardened American attitudes against Iraq. Reports of thousands of Kuwaiti civilians being arrested, tortured and executed – often in front of their own families – by Iraqi troops brought more condemnation. Additionally, Saddam refused to allow remaining foreigners in Kuwait to leave. This further angered the international community, especially after a British boy was shown as one of the hostages as part of television propaganda.

In addition to all these causes for international concern, Iraq's occupation of Kuwait also threatened the international economy. Iraq already controlled significant amounts of the world's oil, and the invasion of Kuwait gave it access to more. With Iraqi troops just a few miles away from Kuwait's border with Saudi Arabia, America in particular became concerned that Saddam might invade and seize control of the Saudi oil fields as well. This would have put more than half of the world's oil fields under Iraqi control.

Over a decade before, on the 23rd January 1980, American President Jimmy Carter announced a policy of using military force to defend its national interests in the Persian Gulf. Although originally a Cold War warning to the Soviet Union, the Carter Doctrine was



implemented by President George Bush when he approved a mission to prevent Iraq invading Saudi Arabia. Operation Desert Shield began on the 7th August, just a few days after the invasion of Kuwait, and provided the backbone for the international coalition against Iraq.

On 29 November 1990 the UN Security Council passed Resolution 678, which gave Iraq an ultimatum. If Iraqi troops did not withdraw from Kuwait by the 15th January 1991, military force would be used against them. US Secretary of State James Baker visited a number of countries to ensure support for a multi-national force, and succeeded in securing troops and money from both Western and Arab countries. Although some of the nations were reluctant, 34 separate countries joined the coalition that was to be commanded by U.S. Army General Norman Schwarzkopf, Jr.

In an exam you may be asked to explain why so many countries were willing to join together to fight against Iraq. A desire to protect the world's oil supplies was certainly a significant factor, but having listened to this podcast you should now have an understanding of other factors.

In the next podcast we'll look at what happened when this huge multi-national force of over 700,000 troops launched its military action in what has become known as the First Gulf War.