



The First Gulf War: Course and Consequences

This is a transcript of the [The First Gulf War](https://www.mrallsophistory.com) podcast from www.mrallsophistory.com

In the previous podcast we explored a range of factors that contributed to the outbreak of what has become known as the First Gulf War. In this episode we'll seek to understand what happened after the huge multi-national force of over 700,000 troops launched its military action to liberate Kuwait.

On the 29th November 1990 the UN had given Iraq an ultimatum: withdraw from Kuwait by the 15th January 1991 or face military force. As the UN's deadline to withdraw approached, Saddam refused to withdraw from Kuwait. Consequently the combat phase of the First Gulf War, known as Operation Desert Storm, began shortly after midnight on the 17th January. Just a few hours later, Saddam Hussein appeared on state radio saying that "The great duel, the mother of all battles has begun. The dawn of victory nears as this great showdown begins." He couldn't have been more wrong. Following five weeks of aerial bombardment, the Coalition's ground assault forced the Iraqi troops from Kuwait in just four days.

The Desert Storm aerial bombing campaign saw over 2,250 Coalition aircraft fly in excess of 1,000 sorties a day for five weeks. Seeking to destroy key military targets and disrupt civilian infrastructure, live footage of the campaign was broadcast around the world on satellite TV. Having virtually destroyed Iraq's air force and anti-aircraft defences, the Coalition quickly established air supremacy. A veteran Iraqi soldier from the Iran-Iraq War even commented that his brigade had suffered more damage from the coalition air force than from "eight years of fighting against Iran."

Saddam hoped in vain that the level of destruction caused by the Coalition's vastly superior air force would result in world opinion turning against them. Finding that this didn't happen, he instead tried to break up the Western-Arab Coalition by launching Scud missile attacks on Israel. Israel was not a part of the coalition, but if it was to join the war its involvement would have made continued Arab support difficult. In the event, however, Israel was convinced by the United States not to respond to the missile strikes and the Coalition held together.

By the time the Coalition launched its full-scale ground attack on the 24th February, Iraq was therefore at a significant disadvantage. Although a number of smaller missions had already demonstrated that Iraq's dated military equipment and poorly-trained army was no match for the Coalition forces, U.S. generals were still surprised at the speed of their advance. An estimated 10,000 Iraqi prisoners were taken on the first day.

On the 27th February, Saddam Hussein called a retreat from Kuwait. Some Iraqi troops continued to engage in fierce fighting at Kuwait International Airport, but by the following day United States President George Bush had declared Kuwait liberated. As they retreated



from Kuwait, however, Iraqi forces employed a scorched earth policy that saw them set fire to almost 700 Kuwaiti oil wells and place land mines around the oil fields in the hope of making it more difficult to extinguish the fires.

On the 28th February President Bush called for a ceasefire. While this was being negotiated, a series of uprisings began in both northern and southern Iraq against Saddam's rule. America hoped that the uprisings would lead to an internal *coup d'état* that would overthrow Saddam, and so the rebellions by Kurds in the north and the Shi'ites in the south were encouraged by the American government. However, they received no physical US support in terms of troops or equipment and were ruthlessly crushed by Saddam's loyal generals and this led to a humanitarian crisis that was only solved when the Coalition introduced no-fly zones to protect civilians from Iraqi attacks that led to the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government.

The ceasefire was imposed by the United Nations. Alongside other terms, Iraq had to recognise Kuwaiti sovereignty and pay reparations for the damage caused during the war. Furthermore, a series of punishing trade sanctions were imposed on Iraq while UN weapons inspectors searched for and destroyed Weapons of Mass Destruction including biological, chemical and nuclear weapons.

The sanctions prevented the import of a huge range of items ranging from machinery to medicines and books. The country was only able to sell very limited amounts of oil which had a direct impact on its ability to buy those few items it could import. Furthermore, a ban on the importation of chemicals such as chlorine – which could be used to make WMDs but is also used to purify water – led to outbreaks of dysentery as a result of drinking contaminated water. Up to half a million children died as a result of hunger and disease, with 7,000 dying every month by 1997. The 'Oil for Food' programme was therefore introduced by the UN in 1996 and went some way to solve the humanitarian crisis.

The decision to call a ceasefire rather than to push on to Baghdad and remove Saddam from power was heavily criticised by some in the American government. However, such action risked fracturing the Coalition since its UN-sanctioned mission only went as far as liberating Kuwait. With this objective met, American troops began to leave the Gulf area on the 10th March.

The search for Weapons of Mass Destruction was conducted by the United Nations Special Committee, known as UNSCOM. Iraq cooperated with the weapons inspectors due to the devastating effects of the sanctions and admitted to stockpiling a range of weapons including nerve gas and chemical warheads. Furthermore the inspectors found enriched uranium that could be used to manufacture nuclear weapons.



It took three years for UNSCOM to destroy the materials that Iraq could use to manufacture WMDs, and to remove all medium- and long-range missiles. Sanctions were having a huge effect on the living conditions of ordinary Iraqis, and the government was keen to have them lifted. However, they failed to provide proof that they had destroyed stocks of anthrax and nerve gas themselves. Coupled with the defection of Saddam's son-in-law who claimed that Saddam had ordered WMDs be hidden, the United States were unwilling to lift the sanctions unless Saddam was removed from power.

Despite the devastating effects of the economic sanctions, Saddam maintained control of the country. He continued to use violence and terror to control his enemies, and rewarded those who remained loyal to him. You can find out more about these systems of control and how they affected life in Saddam's Iraq in a separate podcast. Meanwhile he sought sympathy from the rest of the Arab world by filming and broadcasting the suffering of Iraqi people that had been brought on as a result of the sanctions. After he expelled the UN weapons inspectors in 1997, America and Britain responded with airstrikes against military sites. The bombing campaign and the ongoing sanctions won him further support, and by the year 2000 he had restored diplomatic relations with neighbouring countries. The First Gulf War had shown Saddam that he was unable to match the world's military might, but he had stayed in power.