

## Analyse the causes of the Gulf War (1991).

The Gulf War in 1991 was a conflict between Iraq under Saddam Hussein and the UN Coalition force led by the USA. The outbreak of hostilities began with Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, which was met with economic sanctions and eventually military force by the UN in January 1991, resulting in a decisive victory for the latter. This essay will thus assess the long and short-term developments that led to Saddam's invasion of Kuwait and the involvement of the USA and UN Coalition members, which transformed the conflict into a Gulf War.

Firstly, there had been signs in the long-term that a war between Iraq and Kuwait was likely. Historical territorial disputes between Iraq and Kuwait had become a source of tension between both countries. Both Iraq and Kuwait were previously under the Ottoman Turkish Empire, which was taken over by the British after WW1. Although the British attempted to resolve their borders, Iraq was denied a considerable amount of oil and had its access to the Gulf restricted. This led to deep anger and resentment among the Iraqi public and political leadership, which refused to recognise Kuwait's independence from the British in 1961 in response. Repeated claims on Kuwaiti territory by Iraq pre-1991 only served to deteriorate relations between the two countries, which often amassed their forces along the border, such as 1973 Sanita border skirmish. Thus, invading Kuwait would regain some of Iraq's ancient glory and feed Saddam's inflated ego, who saw himself as a modern day Nebuchadnezzar, hence making war more likely.

However, border clashes and disputes between Iraq and Kuwait had often occurred since Kuwait's independence in 1961. Thus, this does not explain the outbreak of war in 1990. Developments in the short-term were more crucial in explaining Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

In the short-term, according to James DeFronz, the Iran-Iraq war from 1980-88 created the conditions contributing to Saddam's decision to invade Kuwait. The 8-year war between Iran and Iraq had devastated Iraq's economy, resulting in the deaths of almost half a million Iraqis and \$500 billion in losses, while leaving it crippled in debt. By 1990, it could not repay the \$80 billion borrowed from Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, USA and France used to finance the war, much less reconstruct the country. Iraq's economic difficulties and debts after the war thus meant that Saddam's regime needed a rapid injection of capital if it was to survive. By invading Kuwait, Saddam would be able to acquire its enormous oil fields and control 20% of the world's oil supply. Hence, gaining access to the massive wealth of a resource-rich country on its border could resolve Iraq's financial problems once and for all. Furthermore, the end of the Iran-Iraq war left Iraq with a large military force that if unoccupied, could have threatened Saddam's rule. Iraq's precarious economic situation would have been worsened if its 1.5 million-strong army was demobilised, leading to a sudden influx of large numbers of unemployed men. Alarmed by the potential of civil unrest, Saddam was convinced that the answer to the problem of the army was to use it rather than lose it. Conducting a military invasion of Kuwait for its resources thus proved to be an increasingly attractive prospect, driving both countries closer to war.

In addition, the end of the Iran-Iraq war also served to bring Iraqi-Kuwait relations to a nadir, and compel Saddam to launch his set of demands against Kuwait in 1990. During the Iran-Iraq war, Kuwait had illegally extended its border northward, gaining control of the 900 square miles of the profitable Rumaila oil field. In 1990, Iraq accused Kuwait of eroding its profits by illegally extracting oil from the part of the Rumaila that was indisputably within Iraq's borders. Tensions were further escalated when Kuwait was found responsible for producing oil beyond national quotas set by OPEC and driving oil prices down to the detriment of Iraq. This

precipitated an economic crisis in Iraq to the extent that it was left in a worse condition than during its war with Iran, with inflation at 40% and its currency plummeting. With the decimation of Iraq's economy imminent, Saddam launched a set of demands to Kuwait on 17<sup>th</sup> July 1990, threatening to use military force as retribution for Kuwaiti over-production and under-pricing of oil. When crisis talks between both countries failed in August, Iraq thus launched the invasion of Kuwait, triggering the war.

However, according to John Stoessinger, it is highly likely that the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait would not have proceeded if not for Saddam's misjudgement of likely foreign intervention, especially from the USA. During the Iran-Iraq war, the USA had supported Saddam's government as a counterweight to the new anti-US regime in Iran, fearing the danger posed by Iran's Islamic fundamentalism. Annual trade between the USA and Iraq amounted to more than \$3 billion in economic and military assistance by 1990. With these close ties, Saddam thus falsely assumed an invasion of Kuwait would not be opposed. Furthermore, in his meetings with American diplomats and politicians, Saddam was given the impression that they were appeasing him and were sympathetic to Iraq's situation. Most notably, Saddam believed he had obtained the tacit approval of US ambassador April Glaspie in July 1990, who failed to warn him about the consequences of invading Kuwait. Historians like Alastair Finlan have argued that Glaspie did not give a green light to the invasion, but failed to show a red one too. Therefore, Saddam completely miscalculated the likely Western response to his act of aggression, which gave him the confidence to invade Kuwait.

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Moreover, what truly transformed Saddam's invasion of Kuwait from a localised conflict into a Gulf War was the involvement of the Western and Arab states under the United Nations. Firstly, the Western powers were threatened by Saddam's increasing control of Middle East oil. By invading Kuwait, Iraq controlled about 20% of the world's oil production. If left unopposed, Iraq might use Kuwait as an example designed to intimidate other oil-rich Gulf states. If Saddam were to develop an appetite for Saudi Arabia and invade it subsequently, he would be in control of almost half the world's proven oil reserves. The Iraqi threat also raised the prospect of higher oil prices, inflation and a possible recession. Being reliant on imports for about 50% of its oil requirements, it was unacceptable for the USA to be potentially held to ransom by Saddam.

Furthermore, the invasion of Kuwait caused great anger and anxiety amongst majority of the Arab states, which had hoped for a diplomatic solution between Iraq and Kuwait. Many were humiliated and outraged by Saddam's false promise to respect Kuwaiti sovereignty. Moreover, the fact remained that one Arab state had invaded another, making the surrounding states fearful for their security. US spy satellite photographs of Iraqi forces massing close to the Saudi Arabia border only served to confirm the threat posed by a belligerent Iraq to regional stability. With both Western and Arab states opposed to Iraq, the UN Security Council established a six-week deadline for Saddam to withdraw from Kuwait. When he failed to meet it on 16<sup>th</sup> January 1991, the Gulf War began.

In conclusion, Iraqi-Kuwait tensions had been brewing in the long-term over historical territorial disputes, which both countries were unable to resolve. However, these long-term hostilities would not have sufficed to trigger an invasion in 1990 without the Iran-Iraq war, which devastated Iraq's economy and left it with a large, restless army. Kuwait's over-production and under-pricing of oil only served to exacerbate Iraq's decline into economic decimation, which led to Saddam's use of military force when Kuwait failed to comply with his demands. The involvement of the Western and Arab states, fearful for their economies and security, eventually led to war in 1991.