

## The Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait

Kuwait's modern history goes back to the eighteenth century. That's when the Uteiba tribe founded the city of Kuwait. They were part of the Anaiza tribe and historians think they traveled north from Qatar. By the end of the nineteenth century, Kuwait felt threatened by the Ottoman Turks as well as powerful groups from the Arabian Peninsula. So Kuwait sought British protection, as other small states in the region had done.

In January 1899 Sheikh Mubarak al-Sabah signed an agreement with the British government. The Kuwaiti leader pledged that he and successors would never give up territory nor receive any agents or representative of a foreign power without British consent. In exchange, the British provided protection and financial support.

Sheikh Mubarak's descendants continue to rule Kuwait. During the twentieth century's early decades, two things occurred in Kuwait that you have read about in other parts of the Middle East: the discovery of oil and the redrawing of borders. The two were related.

In Sheikh Mubarak's day, Kuwait had about 35,000 people. They built ships out of wood brought in from India and they dived for pearls. But oil changed everything.

The 1922 Treaty of Uqair set the border between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. It also established an area known as the Kuwait–Saudi Arabia Neutral Zone adjacent to Kuwait's southern border. Before then there had been no internationally accepted borders. But when oil was discovered in the 1930s, it suddenly became important to know just where Saudi Arabia left off and Kuwait began.

In 1961 Britain granted Kuwait independence. The new country enjoyed great prosperity under Amir Sabah al-Salim al-Sabah. Kuwait became a sophisticated modern state with a free-market economy. The Kuwaitis and the Saudis worked out some new borders and figured out how to share the oil wealth from their Neutral Zone, renamed the Divided Zone.



The Kuwait Towers, water towers designed by Swedes and built by Yugoslavs in 1975, are a major tourist attraction in Kuwait City.

*Photo by Robert Harbison / © 1991 The Christian Science Monitor*

After gaining its independence from Britain in 1961, Kuwait became a sophisticated modern state with a free-market economy.

But along Kuwait's northern border, things were less friendly. That border dated from an agreement made in 1913 with Turkey—with the Ottomans, in other words, in the last days of their empire. When Iraq became an independent monarchy in 1932, it accepted this border. At that point, Kuwait was still under British protection, while Iraq was just getting its independence from Britain.

The discovery of oil in Kuwait later on in the 1930s, though, made it hard for Iraqis to let go of their claim on this potentially very rich “province.” Iraq also wanted more than just its one port on the Persian Gulf, Basra.

When the British granted independence to Kuwait in 1961, Iraq claimed the new country as its own territory. After all, Baghdad argued, Kuwait had been under Iraqi authority when both countries were part of the Ottoman Empire. Not so, the Kuwaitis argued back. Yes, their country had been part of the empire, but never directly under Iraqi control.

British forces, as well as a force from the Arab League, showed up to protect Kuwait. Iraq eventually backed down in 1963, when a new government, more willing to get along with its neighbors, came to power in Baghdad. Iraq reaffirmed the boundary it had accepted twice before already. Iraq also dropped its objection to Kuwait joining both the United Nations and the Arab League.

Tensions over the issue remained, however, during the 1960s and 1970s. They eased during the 1980s when Iraq was preoccupied with its war with Iran. And Kuwait was a helpful ally to Baghdad, loaning money and allowing the use of its port facilities on the Persian Gulf. But after the war's end, the issue came back to a boil.

The wreckage of a communications tower destroyed during the 1991 Gulf War frames oil facilities in Kuwait's northern desert.

*Photo by Melanie Stetson Freeman / © 1998 The Christian Science Monitor*

On 2 August 1990 Iraq invaded Kuwait for its oil fields.



The reasons for this were complex:

- Iraq was having trouble repaying its debt to Kuwait
- It accused Kuwait of “slant drilling”—drilling for oil at an angle across the border into Iraq’s own territory and taking oil that was rightfully Iraq’s
- Iraq also accused Kuwait of manipulating the price of oil to limit Iraq’s oil earnings
- Iraq wanted Kuwait’s oil fields for itself.

On 2 August 1990 Iraq attacked and invaded Kuwait, claiming it as a nineteenth province. It took Saddam Hussein’s 120,000 troops just two days to overrun Kuwait.

### **The United Nations and US Reaction to the Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait**

Many world leaders condemned the move at once. British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher called it “absolutely unacceptable.” US President George H. W. Bush called the invasion “a naked act of aggression.” The United Nations Security Council went into an emergency session. It called for the “immediate and unconditional” pullout of Iraqi forces. On 9 August the council voted 15-0 to declare Iraq’s annexation of Kuwait “null and void.” The Soviet Union, Iraq’s main arms supplier, stopped shipments of all military aid.

No Arab state condemned the invasion, however. And at first, there was no suggestion of Western military action.

### **Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm**

Over the following months, the crisis grew more intense. Early on, Iraq marched 20,000 troops to the Kuwaiti-Saudi border. Some feared this was preparation for an Iraqi attack on Saudi oil fields through Kuwait. Officials in Washington worried that such an attack might distract Saudi Arabia and other countries from Kuwait’s plight. If Saudi oil fields were left alone, the world might just accept the Iraqi takeover of Kuwait.

On the other hand, many people around the world doubted that President Bush would actually lead the United States to war to liberate Kuwait. But he insisted, “This will not stand.” He continued to pursue diplomatic options. He hoped that Saddam Hussein could be persuaded to withdraw from Kuwait. He tried to find a way to let the Iraqi leader pull out and still save face. But Bush also continued to insist that his options were “wide open.” And so he worked to line up an international coalition that would oust Iraq from Kuwait, by armed force if necessary.

The American perspective held to two important principles here. One was the US national interest in keeping the Gulf region’s oil lanes open. President Carter stated in 1980 that this was an interest the United States would defend at all costs, including military force.