

In addition to targeting Kurdish rebels, the Iraqi government killed civilians indiscriminately using chemical weapons and bombs. As civilians fled their villages, the Iraqi army rounded them up, executed them, and buried them in mass graves. The campaign killed between 50,000 and 100,000 Iraqi Kurds. In some parts of Kurdistan up to 90 percent of villages were destroyed.



United States Air Force.

U.S. Air Force jets fly over burning oil wells during the Persian Gulf War.

The First Persian Gulf War

On July 25, 1990, the U.S. ambassador to Iraq, April Glaspie, met with Saddam Hussein at the presidential palace in Baghdad. In their conversation, Saddam Hussein declared that Kuwait was pumping oil that rightfully belonged to Iraq from deposits along the Iraq-Kuwait border. The Iraqi dictator also complained that Kuwait was intentionally keeping oil prices low to slow his own country's economic recovery from the Iran-Iraq war. When Glaspie left the meeting, she believed that she had clearly warned Saddam Hussein of the dangers of using force to resolve his dispute with Kuwait. The conversation did not make the same impression on Saddam Hussein. Eight days later, 100,000 Iraqi troops poured across the desert border into Kuwait.

A few years earlier, during the Cold War, the United States might have hesitated to take strong action against Iraq for fear of setting off a wider international crisis. But by 1990, both the world and the U.S. outlook had changed. President George H.W. Bush (1989-1993) spoke of creating a "new world order" in which the leading powers would work together to prevent aggression and enforce international law.

The first President Bush carefully built domestic and international support for measures against Iraq. He pushed first for an economic

blockade, and then sought support for military action. In November 1990, President Bush won UN approval to use "all necessary means" to force Iraq out of Kuwait. The UN resolution authorizing a U.S. invasion enjoyed wide support internationally. Most countries felt that military action was justified because Iraq had violated a fundamental principle of the UN Charter that prohibits aggression against a UN member state. A deadline was set—January 15, 1991—for Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait.

What did people in the United States think about going to war?

Within the United States, people were split about how far the country should go in its response to Iraq's aggression. Opposition to using force was especially strong from some U.S. military leaders concerned about possible casualties. Many warned that Iraq would turn to chemical weapons or terrorist tactics if attacked. Some worried that Iraq might even possess nuclear bombs.

Critics of the war felt that economic sanctions should be given more time to take effect. Some argued that the plan to attack Iraq was motivated by U.S. economic interests, particularly the desire to control Iraq's massive oil resources. War protesters carried signs that read "no blood for oil." Proponents of war not-

ed that if Iraq controlled the Kuwaiti oil fields, Saddam Hussein would own one-quarter of the world's oil resources.

“Our jobs, our way of life, our own freedom and the freedom of friendly countries around the world would all suffer if control of the world’s great oil reserves fell into the hands of Saddam Hussein.”

—President George H.W. Bush, August 16, 1990

President Bush favored attacking Iraq quickly. He doubted that economic sanctions alone would pressure Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait. He also felt that the coalition of countries he had assembled would not hold together long. Particularly worrisome was Saddam Hussein’s appeal in the Arab world. Saddam Hussein sought to rekindle Arab nationalism and called for Arabs to unite against Israel and its ally the United States. U.S. officials feared that his message would deepen hostility toward the United States throughout the Middle East.

President Bush asked the U.S. Senate in early January to approve military action to drive Iraq out of Kuwait if the deadline was not met. His request passed by five votes.

What happened in the Persian Gulf War?

After the assault against Iraq began in mid-January 1991, the majority of people in the United States rallied behind the war effort. Despite Saddam Hussein’s prediction of “the mother of all battles,” his army proved no match for the United States and its allies. For over a month, coalition warplanes bombed Iraqi targets. By the time allied ground troops moved forward in late February 1991, communication links within Iraq’s army had been shattered. Coalition forces, who came from



Kurdish refugees in northern Iraq receive relief supplies from coalition forces in 1991.

PH3 Klein, U.S. Department of Defense.

twenty-eight countries, retook Kuwait’s capital with little resistance.

After one hundred hours, President Bush brought the ground war to a halt. The president and his advisors, concerned about the consequences of controlling a completely destabilized Iraq, objected to totally destroying Iraq’s retreating army and toppling Saddam Hussein. Instead, they allowed the remnants of Iraq’s front-line divisions to limp northward.

The Persian Gulf War was one of the most lopsided conflicts in history. During the war, the U.S.-led military coalition dropped 88,500 tons of bombs, striking military facilities, power stations, bridges, roads, hospitals, and other civilian buildings. The immediate effect of the bombing was heavy damage to the country’s infrastructure—Baghdad had less than 5 percent of its normal water supply, and Iraq produced 4 percent of its prior levels of electricity.

In all, coalition forces suffered only 260 deaths, 146 of them U.S. troops. Iraq, however, lost as many as 100,000 soldiers and civilians. Iraq’s environment also suffered as Saddam Hussein ordered retreating Iraqi troops to set hundreds of Kuwaiti oil wells on fire and spill thousands of barrels of oil into the Persian Gulf.

Why were Kurds and Shi'i Arabs targeted by Saddam Hussein's forces?

During the war, President Bush had encouraged the Iraqi people to topple Saddam Hussein themselves.

“There’s another way for the bloodshed to stop, and that is for the Iraqi military and the Iraqi people to take matters into their own hands, to force Saddam Hussein, the dictator, to step aside.”

—President George H.W. Bush,
February 15, 1991

The U.S. military scattered leaflets from its aircraft to Iraqi troops below, urging them to rise up and remove Saddam Hussein from power.

Shi'i rebels fought Iraqi forces in southern cities like Najaf, Karbala, and Kufa. Many believed that coalition forces would come to their aid. In the north, Kurds also believed that they could wrest power from Saddam Hussein and become independent. Kurdish rebels captured the oil-rich city of Kirkuk.

In the end, President Bush decided to end the war quickly and to leave Saddam Hussein in power. Many Iraqis that rose up in rebellion felt betrayed and abandoned when their efforts received no U.S. military support. They had interpreted the United States' calls for rebellion as an unofficial pledge to assist the uprisings. Ultimately, the Iraqi military was able to crush the uprisings in the north and south in part because the rebels did not receive coalition support.

In the south, the Iraqi army attacked the cities held by rebels. Thousands died at the hands of Iraqi forces. Numerous Shi'i holy

shrines were damaged. Saddam Hussein's forces raped, tortured and executed Iraqi civilians.

In the north, the Iraqi military led an assault on the Kurds, bombing and shelling the city of Kirkuk. More than two million Kurds fled into mountains in neighboring Turkey and Iran. At one point during 1991, more than two thousand Kurds died each day due to disease and exposure.

When the Persian Gulf War ended in 1991, U.S. forces set up a UN operation in northern Iraq to protect the 3.7 million Kurds from Saddam Hussein. France, the United Kingdom, and the United States used their air forces to establish and maintain “no-fly” zones in northern and southern Iraq. The no-fly zones prevented the Iraqi military from using planes against the Kurds in the north and the Shi'a in the south, but they did not stop Saddam Hussein from flying helicopters in the south. The use of armed helicopters helped Saddam Hussein defeat the rebels. Many Shi'a in southern Iraq saw the U.S. government's decision to allow the helicopters to fly as an indication that the United States did not want the rebellion to succeed. Throughout the 1990s, the Kurds depended largely on the international community to protect them from the Iraqi army and to provide them with relief supplies.

In this part of the reading you have read about the history and culture of Iraq. You have read about Saddam Hussein's relationship with the United States and how the United States, the United Nations, and other countries responded to Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait. As you read on, ask yourself how this history continued to affect Iraq in the years that followed.