

Chapter

1

Why Iraq Matters

In This Chapter

- ◆ The Israelis take action
- ◆ Recent run-ins with Iraq
- ◆ Saddam's mysterious staying power
- ◆ The big question about Iraq

The year is 1981. A nuclear power plant is nearing completion.

In and of itself, this fact isn't particularly remarkable. Many countries have nuclear power plants ... but this one is different. This state-owned and state-operated plant is located in Iraq, near the capital city of Baghdad. And the state of Israel isn't at all happy about it.

Two factors combine to make this plant disturbing to Israeli politicians, diplomats, and military planners. First, Iraq is a member of *OPEC*. That means it can easily construct a conventional oil-burning, steam-generating power plant, thus taking advantage of its own massive petroleum reserves.

**Desert Diction**

OPEC stands for the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries. The 11 member countries are Algeria, Libya, Nigeria, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Venezuela. OPEC countries exert a measure of control over world oil prices by producing more or less oil.

Why, the Israelis wonder, is the Iraqi leadership opting to create a more expensive nuclear plant?

Second, Iraq is led by Saddam Hussein, whose hostility toward Israel is a) a matter of Iraqi national policy and b) a central feature of Iraq's ongoing effort to inspire an international *pan-Arab movement* to be led by (you guessed it) Saddam Hussein.

The Israelis conclude that the purpose of the plant is to develop material for nuclear weapons—weapons they assume to be meant for deployment against Israel. They respond by engaging in an aerial bombardment of the plant on June 7, 1981. The attack levels the plant.

**Desert Diction**

The **Pan-Arab movement** advocates Arab unity today. Pan-Arabism states that all Arabs should be unified into one state (like the early days of Islam), and that all Arabs have a duty to support the freedom of Arab peoples (notably, Palestinians). The modern Pan-Arab movement was promoted by Nasser of Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s, but Iraq and Egypt vied for control of the movement during that time. The movement achieved a zenith when Egypt, Syria, and Yemen formed the United Arab Republic, and Iraq and Jordan formed a rival Arab Union. Both political experiments failed after just a few years, and no formal political union has been achieved since. The Arab League of 21 Arab-majority states and Palestine continues the Pan-Arab concept, though in watered-down form, and attempts at unification were all but abandoned.

The Iraqi Threat

Since the bombing of the nuclear plant, Iraq has started two wars, concluding the first (against Iran) in a bloody standoff, and being soundly trounced in the other (the Gulf War).

Eventually, an oil-burning power plant was built by General Electric in the nuclear plant's former location. (The plant was destroyed by U.S. bombers during the Gulf War, many of them powered by General Electric engines!) An intriguing sequence of questions arises about the post-1981 world. Suppose the Israelis hadn't destroyed that

nuclear facility ... and suppose further that the Israelis were correct in their assessment that the plant's purpose was to produce weapons-grade uranium.

Would the outcomes of the Iran-Iraq War or the Gulf War have been any different? Would other conflicts have come about? How would they have concluded?

Who Is Saddam?

Today, it's impossible to understand Iraq without understanding Saddam Hussein. And that, unfortunately, is a very tricky business. Here's a brief timeline that will help put his rule in context:

Saddam Hussein was born in Auja, near the city of Tikrit in the vicinity of Baghdad, in 1937, to a middle-class Iraqi family. He joined the Ba'th (Arab Socialist Resurrection) Party in 1956. He participated in the two Ba'thist coups of July 17 and July 30, 1968. After the second coup (which resulted in the Ba'thists taking power in Iraq), Saddam was responsible for internal security. In that role, he became very well-known inside Iraq.

Hussein took power on July 16, 1979, when he forced out Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr as chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council (the group that makes the real day-to-day decisions in the country), as president of Iraq, and as chairman of the Regional Command of the Ba'th Party. After his ouster, Saddam put al-Bakr under house arrest, and purged the former leader's inner circle.

Prior to assuming these titles, Saddam had steadily been assuming more and more authority within the Revolutionary Command Council; the final takeover in 1979, when al-Bakr was placed under arrest, was simply the culmination of his growing power within Iraq.

Shortly after Saddam formally assumed control of state and party structures, an attempted coup was claimed; several members of the Revolutionary Command Council were executed for their alleged role in the plot. Whether there actually was a plot or not is still not clear, but the allegations that there was one provided Saddam with a good excuse for clearing out al-Bakr followers and other factions—and bringing in his own supporters.



Oil Spill Ahead

The Ba'th Arab Socialist Resurrection Party doesn't practice socialism the same way that socialism is practiced in Europe. Like "traditional" socialism, the Ba'th platform believes in land reforms, trade unions, public ownership of natural resources, and worker-managed companies; however, in practice the Ba'th Party suppresses free association and independent trade unions, and state control of resources and factories is dominated from the top.

Since then, Saddam has made a habit of tightening his grip on power in Iraq by murdering potential rivals (including his own son-in-law), and by ordering lethal attacks on possible insurgent groups within Iraq, such as the Shiites and the Kurds. (You'll learn more about Saddam and his rise to power and the Kurds and Shiites in Chapter 3.)

Iraq Yesterday, Iraq Today

Thus far, the story of Iraq under Saddam has been one of violence, chaos, and uncertainty. Today, Iraq matters because Saddam's actions (and imagined future actions) cause concern, fear, and outrage among his neighbors and in the West.

It's easy to forget how important the question of "how to handle Iraq" has become. In the remainder of this chapter, you'll get a brief overview of Saddam's actions over the last two-plus decades, and you'll see why dealing with him and anticipating his actions have become central concerns of U.S. foreign policy.

Saddam and the West: A Timeline

There's a lot to say about what happened in Iraq before 1981 (and I'll say them later on in the book). For the purposes of this chapter, though, I want you to have an overview of recent events, so you can see how these events have shaped the current tense relationship between Iraq and the West.

Prelude: The Iran-Iraq War

In the early 1980s, Iraq was considered an ally of the United States against Iran. The United States had just gotten out from under the Iranian hostage crisis and had no

diplomatic relations with Iran. Iraq had recently begun a war against Iran (the Iran-Iraq War from 1980 to 1988), in an apparent dispute over territory along the *Shatt-al-Arab* waterway.



Desert Diction

The *Shatt-al-Arab* is a name for the waterway at the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, where they join to flow into the Persian Gulf. The region is marshy, with several islands dotting the mouth of the waterway.

The *Shatt-al-Arab* is the main shipping channel for food and supplies from the Gulf to the city of Basra. Until the start of the war, the two countries bordered a portion of the main shipping channel. Controlling the islands on *both* sides of the channel would provide more security in shipping to the country in charge of those islands.

Increase Your Iraq IQ

About 90 percent of the Muslim world, calling themselves Sunnis, believed the caliphs were the successors to the Prophet, and leader and protector of the united community of believers. However, the remaining 10 percent of Muslims—the Shiite sect—rejected the authority of the caliphs. The Shiites argued that the true successors of Mohammed, and thus the true leaders of Islam, are his cousin, Ali and his descendents. While other groups have splintered from the main group of Muslims (the so-called Sunnis), the Shiite group is the largest sect to have survived to the modern time. The Sunnis consider themselves the true “keepers of the faith,” while the Shiites consider themselves to be the same. The Ayatollah Khomeini was a Shiite Muslim, like the vast majority of Iranian Muslims, and more than 50 percent of Iraqi Muslims. However, Saddam Hussein and his followers are Sunni Muslims. You can read more on the Sunni-Shiite differences in Chapter 3, but suffice it to say, Saddam was only too happy to remove a Shiite leader from Iraq, given the preponderance of Shiites in his own country.

The islands originally belonged to Iraq, but they were seized by Iran in 1971. At this time, Iraq protested but did nothing. Finally, in 1981, Saddam used the Iranian occupation of the islands as a pretext for picking a fight with Iran.

Saddam appears to have assumed that the Iranians were weakened and distracted by their recent revolution, which overthrew the Shah (the ruler of Iran) and established an Islamic republic. Relations between the Shah and Saddam had never been warm, but the relationship between Saddam and the Ayatollah Khomeini (the Shah’s replacement) was even colder. In fact, Saddam had expelled the Ayatollah from Iraq in the 1970s, at the request of the Shah.

The United States provided tentative support for Iraq in this dispute, on the theory that Iraq was the lesser of the two evils, and in the hope that Iraq could topple the Ayatollah.

The war, however, didn’t go well for Iraq. The Iranians put up a strong fight, and the war settled into a grinding battle of attrition, where neither side was gaining much of an advantage. The battles were costly, and eventually both sides were ready to quit. Finally, after years of indescribably bloody conflict, the fighting ended in a standoff in 1988, with no change in the borders or shared control of the Shatt-al-Arab. Both sides rested and reloaded.

1987–1990: Iraq Turns Its Attention to Kuwait

Saddam soon began planning a new conflict with Iraq’s tiny, oil-rich neighbor Kuwait. From Saddam’s perspective, a new and provocative campaign had certain advantages:

- ◆ Invasion offered the potential to enrich Iraq and improve its strategic position in the Middle East.
- ◆ Military victories would help legitimize Saddam's authority within Iraq, which was diminished after the Iranian stalemate.
- ◆ New military conflicts would provide an excuse for shortages of consumer goods within Iraq.
- ◆ New military conflicts would provide cover for counter-insurgency work inside Iraq.

Thus, during this period, Iraq became increasingly belligerent against its (militarily weak) neighbor, Kuwait, and even began to behave in a way that alienated other members of the OPEC cartel.

1990: Iraq Invades Kuwait

The other shoe finally dropped on August 2, 1990, when Iraq invaded Kuwait. The United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 660 demanded complete withdrawal, but Saddam refused to leave. The United States led a diplomatic initiative at the United Nations to get international support for a coalition to get Iraq out of Kuwait. This initiative resulted in UN Security Council Resolution 661, passed on August 6, 1990, which imposed economic sanctions on Iraq.

Saddam responded by formally annexing Kuwait on August 8.

1991: Operation Desert Storm

By January of the next year, President George H. Bush's administration had completed the task of assembling a coalition of Western and Arab states to get Saddam out of Kuwait. Military action started when the coalition forces began bombing Iraq on January 16, 1991. The ground attack began on February 24 and ended three days later, with a total Iraqi military collapse and Kuwait liberated.

However, UN forces did not invade Baghdad, and didn't remove Saddam from power. The only goal of the coalition had been the liberation of Kuwait. To many policy makers' disapproval, the removal of Saddam was not on the agenda.

1991: Cease-Fire and Sanctions

The United Nations and Iraq, negotiated a cease-fire that took effect on March 3, 1991. The Bush administration fully expected Saddam's government to collapse due

to the spectacular failure of his military, but he managed to hang on. In fact, by April of that same year, Iraqi forces were soon up to their old tricks, brutally suppressing Shiite insurgents in southern Iraq, and Kurdish rebels in the North. In response, the United Nations established no-fly zones in northern and southern Iraq to provide havens for the Kurds in the north, and the Shiites in the south. U.S. and British aircraft patrol the no-fly zones and do not allow Iraqi military flights in those areas.

At the time of the cease-fire, the United Nations placed stiff sanctions on Iraq, forbidding them to export oil without UN approval. Oil is the only major export product of Iraq, and thus selling it is the only way the country can make money and buy arms. The sanctions were seen as a good way to control how much money Iraq could bring in. The cease-fire also included measures for UN weapons inspectors to monitor Iraqi facilities that may make biological, chemical, or nuclear weapons.

According to the agreements of the cease-fire, UN weapons inspectors were supposed to be able to see any facility, anywhere in Iraq, that they suspected could be used for weapons production. However, as history has taught us again and again, agreements seem to be made to be broken.

1995–2000: Conflicts over Sanctions and Inspections

Recent years have seen dramatic setbacks in the U.S. effort to impose sanctions and deter weapons-development activity in Iraq.

Sanctions

Enforcing the sanctions turned into a public relations and logistical nightmare for the United States and its allies. First, it has been reported that hundreds of thousands, and possibly as many as 1 million, Iraqi citizens (mostly children) have died due to UN-imposed and U.S.-enforced sanctions. Whatever the number, and whatever the direct cause, the Iraqi people didn't get needed medicine and died in large numbers as a result.

The sanctions became difficult for U.S. allies in Europe and the Gulf to support. Iraq counted on increasing international discomfort with the effects of the sanctions on Iraqi civilians, to bring about an easing of the restrictions. On April 14, 1996, UN Security Council Resolution 986 allowed for the partial resumption of Iraq's oil exports to buy food and medicine. Iraq argued over the conditions of the program, and didn't accept the terms until May 1996. The first shipments started in December 1996. By 2000, international air travel was resumed.

Also in 2000, Iraq attempted to have oil buyers put a \$.50/barrel payment into a separate account, not controlled by the United Nations; Iraq could use this money to buy

whatever it wanted, rather than medicine or food for its people. The United Nations rejected this attempt, but the episode illustrates the degree to which the original sanctions have eroded. In 2001, rail traffic was resumed with Turkey, and Iraqi trade has steadily returned to pre-sanction levels.

Inspections

The weapons inspection program has been a notable foreign-policy failure for the United States and its allies.

The initial goal of the program was to take away Iraq's ability to make weapons of mass destruction. This goal has not been accomplished. The George W. Bush administration has stated that it suspects there are weapons facilities in Iraq. Iraq has taken advantage of loopholes in the inspections agreement that stipulated that the weapons inspectors could not inspect any "Presidential Palaces." Saddam simply designated hundreds of facilities as "Presidential Palaces," and refused to allow the inspectors in to see them.

The only real enforcement mechanism available to the United Nations when Saddam didn't comply was more bombing. Over time, this drastic military response became increasingly difficult for the Arab states, and many of the Western allies, to support. Bombing seemed an unreasonable response to Iraqi stubbornness. Also, it is difficult to determine if the bombings have done the job.



Iraq Fact

Since the close of the Gulf War, the Bush Sr., Clinton, and Bush Jr. administrations have maintained a steady pace of bombing, cruise missile, and air-ground missile attacks on Iraq. These raids have concentrated on destroying Iraqi air defense installations. The difficulty of maintaining the international coalition against Iraq is underscored by international distaste for the continued bombing campaigns, and even some support for Saddam as the "victim" of U.S. aggression.

On October 31, 1998, Iraq ended all forms of cooperation with the UN Special Commission to Oversee the Destruction of Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction (UNSCOM) and threw out the weapons inspectors. The United Nations did virtually nothing in response.

On December 16, the United States and Britain initiated "Operation Desert Fox." The bombing campaign was supposed to destroy Iraq's nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons capabilities, but the affects of the attacks are not clear. Since the original

UNSCOM inspection set up was not working, the United Nations replaced it with the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC). Iraq has rejected this commission as well.

Finally, in February 2001, the United States and Britain attacked Iraqi air defense systems in order to ensure the continued safe patrolling of the no-fly zones. However, the attacks were criticized by the Arab states in the region, and by Western European allies, showing how far the support for inspections has fallen.

2002 and Beyond: What's Next?

During the Cold War, the big question was what to do about the Soviets, but in the post-Cold War era, it is what to do about *rogue states*. The George W. Bush administration has singled out three countries in particular as the so-called “Axis of Evil”: Iran, Iraq, and North Korea. The United States and the West in general have had a very tough time dealing with these rogue countries. In fact, the Bush administration has alienated its European allies with the “Axis” analogy, and by lumping the three nations together. Some European countries enjoy better relations with Iran or Iraq than the United States, and don’t wish to have their relationships stigmatized with the “Axis of Evil” label.

In the wake of the Gulf War, Iraq has steadily, and effectively, managed to wriggle out from under the sanctions and inspections, despite the fact that the goals of the sanctions and inspections have not been achieved. In fact, the inspectors say Iraq is in fact making weapons of mass destruction.

The second Bush administration is focusing its efforts in Iraq toward creating a more effective method for inspections and sanctions, in order to maintain some kind of control over Saddam.



Desert Diction

Rogue states are states that don't work with the rest of the world, and are probable exporters of terrorism. Isolation, imposed or self-created, is a hallmark of a rogue state. Rogue states typically also threaten their neighbors with destruction.

An International Hot Spot

Today, Iraq is a focal point of an ongoing and escalating global controversy. This controversy has three main elements:

- ◆ **Human rights.** Iraqi laws are, to Western sensibilities, incomprehensibly harsh. Many laws call for death or dismemberment for crimes like theft, currency

speculation, and military desertion. Furthermore, Saddam has persistently attacked the Shiites and Kurds within his own country, even using chemical weapons against them. These continued human rights abuses call for some kind of response.



Oil Spill Ahead

The images of dead Iraqi children, suffering from lack of food and medicine, will continue to fuel a global PR disaster that is likely to haunt U.S. foreign policy for years to come. Iraq has managed to turn public perception in much of the world totally against the sanctions, and by association, the weapons inspections.

- ◆ **Ongoing uncertainty about Saddam's intentions.** This is the guy who has started two wars, used chemical weapons on his own people, killed his son-in-law, and tried to assassinate former President Bush. This is not a person who can be relied on to behave rationally.
- ◆ **Sanctions.** The current sanctions program has failed. The sanctions themselves are divisive, with most U.S. allies and Arab states objecting to them. Unrest in the Islamic world over U.S. policy toward Iraq has been particularly intense, and the sanctions themselves have become unenforceable without escalation to total military response.

The Big Question

One big question looms for U.S. policy-makers: "What do we do about Saddam?"

It is a recurrent question, and one that is unlikely to go away. Any answer is likely to be both loud and unpopular in certain quarters of the world.

The Least You Need to Know

- ◆ Iraq is vital to U.S. interests due to its strategic location in the oil-rich Persian Gulf region.
- ◆ Iraq is an ongoing focal point for U.S. policy-makers, and an ongoing PR disaster for the U.S. administrations enforcing the UN sanctions.
- ◆ Saddam Hussein, the leader of Iraq, is demonstrably hostile to the United States and its allies.
- ◆ Iraq is an even greater threat to the U.S. national interests as a potential exporter of terrorism, than as a direct military threat to U.S. allies in the Gulf.
- ◆ The future actions of Iraqi leadership, Iraqi foreign policy, and the continuance of UN sanctions, have never been more uncertain.