Causes Of The Gulf War

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After the Iran-Iraq War, the 1990–1991 Gulf War became the largest military conflict in the Middle East since that eight-year war. On August 2, 1990, Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait. A broad international coalition led militarily by the United States, and including Britain, France, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria, and many other countries, was subsequently formed to defend Saudi Arabia and restore Kuwait's sovereignty (Office of the Historian, 2026).

The Gulf War (1990–1991)

Causes Of The Gulf War

The invasion resulted from several connected disputes rather than one single cause. Iraq emerged from the Iran–Iraq War heavily indebted and economically weakened. It owed large sums to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia and argued that it had defended the Arab Gulf states from Iran. Saddam Hussein expected some of those debts to be forgiven, but Kuwait did not accept Iraq's demands.

Oil policy was another major source of tension. Iraq accused Kuwait of exceeding agreed production levels and contributing to lower world oil prices, which reduced Iraqi revenue at a time when Baghdad urgently needed funds for reconstruction and debt repayment. Iraq also accused Kuwait of extracting oil from the Rumaila field across the border, although Kuwait disputed the allegation.

Longstanding territorial disagreements intensified the crisis. Iraqi governments had previously claimed that Kuwait had historically formed part of Iraq or the Ottoman province of Basra. Iraq also sought greater access to the Persian Gulf and raised disputes concerning the islands of Bubiyan and Warbah. These claims were intertwined with Saddam Hussein's regional ambitions, military confidence after the Iran–Iraq War, and miscalculation of the likely international response (Imperial War Museums, 2026).

Iraq attempted to pressure Kuwait through negotiations and demands for debt relief, compensation, production changes, and territorial concessions. When the disputes were not resolved on Iraqi terms, Saddam Hussein chose military force. The invasion was therefore a deliberate act of aggression, not an unavoidable result of economic disagreement.

The Invasion Of Kuwait

Iraqi forces crossed into Kuwait on August 2, 1990, rapidly overwhelming the much smaller Kuwaiti armed forces. The Kuwaiti government and royal family escaped to Saudi Arabia, while Iraqi forces occupied the country. Iraq subsequently announced the annexation of Kuwait and described it as an Iraqi province.

The United Nations Security Council responded on the day of the invasion with Resolution 660, condemning the invasion and demanding Iraq's immediate and unconditional withdrawal. Resolution 662 later declared Iraq's purported annexation of Kuwait null and void. These resolutions established that the international response concerned the restoration of Kuwait's sovereignty rather than the settlement of Iraq's economic grievances by force (United Nations Security Council, 1990).

The International Reaction

The invasion was widely condemned. The United Nations imposed comprehensive economic sanctions through Resolution 661, while the United States deployed forces to Saudi Arabia in Operation Desert Shield. The deployment sought to deter a possible Iraqi attack on Saudi Arabia and to build the military capacity required to defend the region and enforce the UN resolutions.

The coalition was politically important because it included Western and Arab states. The United States also worked with the Soviet Union during the final phase of the Cold War, making the crisis an early test of post-Cold War international cooperation. Diplomacy continued through the autumn of 1990, but Iraq did not withdraw.

On November 29, 1990, Security Council Resolution 678 gave Iraq until January 15, 1991, to comply with Resolution 660 and related resolutions. If Iraq failed to do so, member states cooperating with Kuwait were authorised to use "all necessary means" to restore international peace and security. Iraq remained in Kuwait after the deadline (United Nations Security Council, 1990).

The Development Of The War

The coalition air campaign began during the night of January 16–17, 1991. Operation Desert Storm targeted Iraqi military forces, command systems, air defences, communications, supply networks, and strategic facilities. The air campaign lasted more than five weeks before the ground offensive began on February 24.

The coalition used a direct attack into Kuwait together with a wide western movement into Iraq that outflanked many Iraqi positions. Coalition ground forces liberated Kuwait in approximately 100 hours. Iraq announced its withdrawal, and President George H. W. Bush suspended offensive operations on February 28, 1991. The U.S. Army's official history describes the campaign as a large joint and

multinational operation that demonstrated extensive integration of air, land, and sea power (U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2010).

Iraqi Missile Attacks

Iraq launched modified Scud missiles at Israel and Saudi Arabia. Saddam Hussein appears to have hoped that Israeli retaliation would divide the coalition by making participation politically difficult for Arab governments. The United States urged Israel not to retaliate and deployed Patriot air-defence systems. Israel's restraint helped preserve the coalition.

The missile attacks caused deaths, injuries, damage, and fear, although they did not produce the political split Iraq sought. They also demonstrated the regional risks created by ballistic missiles and chemical-weapons concerns.

Environmental Damage

The conflict caused extraordinary environmental harm. Iraqi forces released oil into the Persian Gulf and set hundreds of Kuwaiti oil wells on fire during their retreat. The burning wells produced immense smoke plumes, deposited soot and oil over land and water, damaged habitats, and created severe occupational and public-health risks.

The fires took months to extinguish and required a major international engineering effort. Oil lakes, contaminated soils, damaged coastal environments, and unexploded ordnance remained long after the fighting ended. The environmental destruction became one of the most visible legacies of the conflict (Australian War Memorial, 2023).

End Of War And Main Consequences

Kuwait's government was restored after liberation. Iraq accepted the ceasefire framework established through Security Council Resolution 687 in April 1991. The resolution imposed obligations involving weapons of mass destruction, inspections, reparations, the border, and the return of Kuwaiti property and detainees.

Saddam Hussein remained in power. Soon after the ceasefire, uprisings occurred in northern and southern Iraq. The Iraqi government suppressed them, producing large refugee movements and humanitarian crises. The United States, Britain, and France later enforced no-fly zones, while UN sanctions and weapons inspections continued through the 1990s.

The war strengthened the U.S. military and political presence in the Gulf and demonstrated the United States' dominant role after the Cold War. It also deepened regional resentment, placed foreign forces in Saudi Arabia, and contributed to political conditions that shaped later conflicts.

The consequences included:

- the liberation and restoration of Kuwait's internationally recognised government;
- severe Iraqi and Kuwaiti military, civilian, economic, and environmental losses;
- a long sanctions and weapons-inspection regime imposed on Iraq;
- continued rule by Saddam Hussein and violent repression of internal uprisings;
- expanded U.S. security commitments and military basing in the Gulf;
- significant health problems among some veterans and continued research into Gulf War illness; and
- political and strategic legacies that influenced the 2003 Iraq War.

Historical Context

The Gulf War occurred during the transformation of the international system between 1989 and 1991. The Berlin Wall had fallen, communist governments in Eastern Europe were collapsing, and the Soviet Union was approaching dissolution. Unlike many Cold War crises, the United States and Soviet Union broadly cooperated in opposing Iraq's seizure of Kuwait.

The crisis therefore became an early example of collective security in the emerging post-Cold War order. President Bush spoke of a "new world order" in which aggression would be opposed through international cooperation. However, the conflict also showed the limits of that vision. The coalition restored Kuwait but did not remove Saddam Hussein, resolve Iraq's internal repression, or create a stable regional settlement (Office of the Historian, 2026).

Casualties And Costs

Casualty estimates vary substantially, particularly for Iraqi military personnel and civilians. Coalition military deaths were much lower than Iraqi losses, reflecting the coalition's technological, intelligence, air-power, and logistical advantages. Claims that tens of thousands of Kuwaiti civilians died during the six-week coalition campaign are inaccurate; Kuwait suffered grave occupation abuses and losses, but commonly cited figures are far below the 30,000 deaths claimed in older versions of this essay.

The financial cost was also large, but Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Japan, Germany, and other states contributed substantial funding to the U.S.-led operation. Kuwait then faced the immense cost of rebuilding infrastructure, restoring oil production, extinguishing fires, clearing mines, and addressing environmental damage.

Why The Coalition Did Not Remove Saddam Hussein

The coalition's UN mandate focused on expelling Iraqi forces from Kuwait and restoring international peace and security, not conquering Iraq or changing its government. Coalition leaders also feared that

marching to Baghdad could fracture the alliance, cause heavier casualties, produce an open-ended occupation, and destabilise Iraq.

The decision ended the immediate war but left Saddam Hussein in power. Supporters argued that the coalition had achieved its authorised objective. Critics later argued that the unresolved Iraqi regime and sanctions system created future instability. The question remains central to historical assessments of the war.

Conclusion

The Gulf War was caused by Iraq's decision to invade and annex Kuwait after a period of debt, oil, border, and regional-power disputes. Economic grievances help explain Saddam Hussein's calculations, but they did not justify the use of force. The decisive cause of the international war was Iraq's refusal to withdraw after repeated UN demands.

The coalition campaign liberated Kuwait quickly, but the wider consequences endured for decades. Sanctions, inspections, no-fly zones, Iraqi internal repression, a permanent U.S. military presence in the Gulf, environmental destruction, and unresolved conflict with Saddam Hussein all followed. The war was therefore both a limited military victory and a major turning point in the political history of the post-Cold War Middle East (Office of the Historian, 2026; U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2010).

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