

The gulf war and the role of air power in the gulf war in 1991

[Business](#), [Industries](#)



Introduction

The Gulf War remains an important event in modern history for various reasons. Firstly, it can be argued that the Gulf War is significant as it gives the background to the overall recent warfare known as the 'Iraq War' (Coyote, 2013, p. 24). Although the perceived reasons for invading Kuwait are still disputed amongst researchers,, the most popular reason given for the invasion is Iraq's allegation that Kuwait was stealing its oil (Freedman & Karsh, 1991, p. 52). How far this was a significant cause of the war will be explored, in addition to the role that developing air power played in this War. One of the main questions this essay will attempt to answer is: did air power play a major role in the bringing the War to an end? Finally, the essay will discuss the wider impact of the Gulf War on the Iraqi Government, and how it has affected the country in the modern day.

Why did the Iraqi Government invade Kuwait?

There has been unending debate on what the exact reason Iraqi invaded Kuwait, with scholars disagreeing on what transpired in the events the preceded the breakout of the war (Flanagan, 1991, p. 18). It is fair to say that it was a culmination of several factors that led to Kuwait invasion, and no single factor could be seen as the catalyst for military action. Firstly, Iraq was heavily indebted to both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait due to their financial backing of Iraq in its war against Iran (Khadduri & Ghareeb 1997, p. 1). Kuwait did more than just support the war against Iran financially; they also offered assistance by effectively becoming Iraq's major port following the closure of Basra at the height of the conflict (Khadduri & Ghareeb 1997, p.

3). The close tie between Iraqi and Kuwait during the former's war against Iran later led to Iran targeting the country following its financial support to Iraq. Iraq owed Kuwait more than \$80 billion, which the Iraqi Government could not pay back (Cordesman & Wagner 1996, p. 45). Despite pleas from Iraq to Kuwait to write off \$14 billion of the debt, Kuwait refused. The fact that Kuwait were not willing to negotiate the debt in favour of Iraq angered Iraqi Government, further increasing tension between the two countries (Danchev & Keohane, 1993, p. 23). Another factor widely speculated to have increased the tension between the two countries is when Iraq claimed certain parts of Kuwait were actually Iraqi territory (Khadduri & Ghareeb, 1997, p. 4).

Shortly before the commencement of the war, the Iraqi Government alleged that Kuwait was stealing petroleum from Iraq by way of slant-drilling into Iraq's Rumaila field (Freedman & Karsh, 1991, p. 52). This resulted in heated disputes between the two countries, with allegations that Kuwait was stealing oil worth in the region of \$2.4 billion (1994, pp. 23-30). This, according to Muellor (1994, pp. 23-30) arguably put more pressure on a relationship that was already strained. Muellor observe that Kuwait argued that the allegations were ill-founded and fabricated in order to justify Iraq's resolve to take military action against Kuwait. Foreign firms working in the area took Kuwait's side, as the common belief built on the belief that the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq was heavily influenced by Iraq's motivation to obtain the country's significant petroleum supplies. Some alleged that the decision to invade Kuwait had been mooted a couple of months before

August 1990, as the crisis was coming to a climax (Freedman & Karsh, 1994, pp. 63-65). Linked to this issue is the allegation by Iraq that Kuwait was overproducing petroleum, which caused a revenue decrease for Iraq. It was estimated that during the period of 1985-1989, every year Iraq suffered a \$14 billion deficit as a direct result of Kuwait's oil production (Finlan, 2003, p. 24). Whilst Iraq did try to negotiate with Kuwait, they did not reduce their production, which must have angered the Iraqi government. Some historians say that Iraq viewed this refusal as an act of defiance, which then became a powerful trigger for the War (Fisk, 2006, p. 18). Therefore, as is often the case with invasion events, politics, money and oil can be shown to be the underlying causes of military action.

An overview of the Gulf War

The Gulf War took place between August 1990 and February 1991. Following Iraq's initial invasion of Kuwait, the main players comprised coalition forces, a combination of 34 different countries led by the United States of America, against Iraq. The Iraqi Republican Guard invaded Kuwait on 2 August 1990 with over 100,000 members of the Iraqi military supported by 700 tanks in the early hours of the morning. This was met immediately by a UN Security Council sanction, which created a ban on all trade with Iraq and the freezing of all its assets (Khadduri & Ghareeb, 1997, p. 73). By 4 August 1990, most Kuwaiti troops either had been overpowered or had fled to Saudi Arabia or Bahrain. Hundreds of thousands of civilians fled the country and many continued to stay there even after the end of the conflict (Flanagan, 1991, pp. 18-26). The initial invasion consisted of intense military action as Iraq

looked to show their intention to occupy its neighbor. This action was internationally condemned, and the UN was strongly encouraged to act and find a way forward (Fulghium, 1991). Countries worldwide called for Iraq's withdrawal from Kuwait, including countries who were previously its allies, such as France and India. This international pressure against the invasion was seen quickly through immediate economic sanctions being placed against Iraq by the UN.

Alongside the period of sanctions, there were efforts to negotiate with Iraq. However, these negotiations broke down, leading the coalition forces to advance their campaign against the invasion. The coalition forces were largely comprised of US military, in addition to troops from the UK, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The main aim of the coalition troops was to expel the Iraqi military from Kuwait (Fisk, 2006: xvii). This commenced with an aerial assault on 17 January 1991 (Fisk, 2006: xvii). Some alleged that the coalition forces joined the US, "for more than a Wilsonian ideal; they did so to protect their own respective national interests, not the least of which included oil, the life blood of the world economy" (Allison, 2012: vii). Nevertheless, the rising number of casualties, especially amongst children worried many people. Lesley Stahl said, "We have heard that a half million children have died. I mean, that's more children than died in Hiroshima...is the price worth it?" (Leigh & Wilson, 2001). Secretary of State Madeleine Albright responded with, "I think this is a very hard choice, but the price – we think the price is worth it" (Leigh & Wilson, 2001). An attack on the ground followed on 24 February, which brought a victory for the coalition forces, freeing Kuwait

from seven months of Iraqi military occupation (Sulton, 1995, pp. 195-200). Following this liberation the coalition entered Iraq and after four days (exactly 100 hours) after the ground assault on Iraq) a ceasefire was declared (Dinackus, 2000, pp. 225-230).

Air Power in the Gulf War

Given the major use of air power in this war, some refer to the Gulf War as the ' 1991 Bombing of Iraq', as Iraq military was enthusiastic to show off their airpower in the region. The bombing campaign began on 17 January 1991 and from that time until the end of the conflict, the coalition forces were involved in flying over 100, 000 sorties in the region. " Air power dominated the media images of the Gulf War. Video footage of precision-guided munitions hitting their targets with pinpoint accuracy remains embedded in popular memory" (Finlan, 2003, p. 30). It is arguable that one of the main factors forcing the retreat of Iraqi troops was the dropping of 88, 500 tons of bombs across the country, which destroyed many areas within cities. The strategy in the air was to target not only Iraqi military sites, but also to destroy structural landmarks. This appears to have made the Iraqi military embark on a defensive strategy in response to the air campaign (Finlan, 2003, p. 33). Hallion (1992) shares this view, and argues that strategy was evolving, seen in how the coalition air forces targeted places and structures rather than citizens. These air tactics, Hallion argues, allowed coalition forces to control Iraq without causing large fatalities. He maintains that, " the air commanders of the Allied coalition could approach the prospect of war with Iraq with such confidence in the air" (Hallion, 1992: 4).

It is this confidence that stopped the Iraqi air force from being able to compete with the strength and quality of the coalition forces.

Posen (2003) agrees with the assertion that air power played a significant role in the Gulf War. He took the view that, “ air power alone may not be able to determine the outcome of all wars, but is a significant asset. Moreover, US air power has proven potentially devastating to mechanized ground forces operating offensively...as was discovered in the only Iraqi mechanized offensive” (Posen, 2003: 16) This shows that, whilst air power was not on its own sufficient for the coalition forces to be outright successful, it did contribute greatly to the overall result. In contrast, however, Press disagrees with this argument and puts forward the view that, “ even after 5 weeks of bombing, the best Iraqi units...were willing to maneuver into the path of US forces.” (Press, 2001: 37). Although Press does agree with Hallion that the coalition forces were more superior when military supplies and availability of resources were compared. The press argues that superior military resources were the main factor why US-led allied team won the war, rather than the much publicised air power.

However, there is considerable support among historians for the idea that air power played a significant part in Iraq's defeat. This includes Schultz and Phahtzgraff who argue that the strategy in the air campaign was an overarching reason why the ground assault brought rapid, total success: “ All major government, military, and party headquarters were wrecked; both civil and military telecommunications were totally silenced; Iraqi air defences were largely incapacitated.” (Schultz & Phahtzgraff, 2001: 19). This strategy

of destroying main services greatly helped the coalition forces and because of this, many scholars argue that air power played a valuable and significant role in their victory.

It was true, however, that Iraqi forces had air power of their own too, and this was evident when they started off their intensive military invasion of Kuwait (Fulghum, 1991: 71-73). One of the reasons for the relatively quick takeover of Kuwait by the Iraqi military was that the former was taken by surprise, and was not able to offer much resistance, particularly in the air (Sayenga, 1991). Therefore, even at the outset of the war, air played a part, by assisting Iraq to take over Kuwait in a very speedy manner. However, when the competing allied forces confronted the Iraqi forces with similar airpower, the latter soon realised that their airpower were less superior. Despite the use of ground-to-air missiles by the Iraqi military, they were no match to the allied forces' military ability (Morrocco, 1991: 40-43). USAF Lieutenant General Chuck Horner led the coalition forces and the overall military air strategy included the deployment of Tomahawk cruise missiles from warships. As part of the air campaign, A-10 Thunderbolts bombing large sections of Iraq, causing considerable military and civilian deaths. It can be safely argued that the air campaign led to the destruction of much of the Iraqi armed forces, and that without this air campaign, the result might have affected the outcome, such is its importance in the Gulf War.

When the coalition forces were combined, their artillery total was 2, 250 combat aircraft, which was significant under any circumstances, but was particularly damaging when compared to the 500 members of the Iraqi air

force (Hallion, 1992). The air campaign is often referred to by its code-name, “ Operation Desert Storm” and more than 1, 000 sorties were sent on a daily basis (Finlan, 2003: 30-32). Iraqi defence forces were not able to stand up to this military assault, particularly when “ the first night of operations over Iraq witnessed the longest bombing run in history”(Finlan, 2003: 35). This puts into perspective how significant the role of air power was, as it had never before been seen on this scale in any war in the history. The casualty numbers were kept to a minimum for the coalition forces who only suffered 75 aircraft losses out of 100, 000 sorties. Faced with this air bombing onslaught, many of the Iraqi air forces fled to Iran. This was unexpected, as coalition military had assumed that the escape might be towards Jordan and had adapted their strategy for this action. After just a few weeks, the air power assault had mostly stopped by 24 February, with the successful entry into Kuwait by coalition troops. It is arguably not a coincidence that the end of the bombing campaign and the end of the War came close together.

The impact of the Gulf War on the Iraqi Government

Following the passing of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 687 in 1991, the UN deployed several other controversial measures against Iraq, (Cortright& Lopez, 2000). As in the aftermath of any War, the Iraqi Government continued to experience financial difficulties as the rising costs of the war impacted across the country (Alnaswari 2000: 89-119). Following the extensive bombing campaign by the coalition forces, the Iraqi Government had to start the process of reconstructing major towns and cities that had been severely destroyed by the bombs. It was reported that Iraqi planners

believed the coalition's intention had been

“ to destroy or damage valuable facilities that Baghdad could not repair without foreign assistance. The worst civilian suffering, senior officers say, has resulted not from bombs that went astray but from precision-guided weapons that hit exactly where they were aimed at electrical plants, oil refineries and transportation networks.” (Gellman 1991).

However, it is in economic terms that the real impact of the Gulf War was felt. Alnasrawi has argued that oil was Iraq's ' gold dust,' forming the bedrock of their economy and therefore the UN sanctions virtually destroyed this industry with the closure of 90% ports and 97% of exports (Alnasrawi, 2000: 89-119). As long after the war as 1996, Iraq was in a dire situation, with a humanitarian crisis, and the UN agreed to offer temporary oil-for-food (OFF) program where Iraq was permitted to sell oil under very stringent conditions. Historians disagree and argue about the exact effect of this on the Iraqi Government; one report stated that, “ Even under the most benign conditions, OFF only allows Iraq to be run as a relatively efficient refugee camp in which people get just about enough food to eat” (Gazdar, 2002). Although it has also been suggested that “ Between the springs of 2000 and 2002, [US and UK] holds on humanitarian goods tripled” (Gordon, 2002), the financial ruin that the Iraqi Government found itself in, was as a direct result of the Gulf War.

Conclusion

With its many casualties and serious effect on global politics, the Gulf War remains a crucial landscape when considering modern politics, particularly in

the Middle Eastern region. During its occupation by the Iraqi military, more than 1000 Kuwaiti civilians died, and thousands more fled the country never to return. As it has been shown here, there are a number of factors put forward as contributing to the invasion of Kuwait, and it has been this essay's aim to argue that the allegation that Kuwait was stealing oil from illegal sources was the ultimate catalyst for the war, rather than the main reason. There were many different forces at play as relations between the two countries had reached volatile to say the least. Nevertheless, what is also interesting in this debate is the suggestion that interest in the conflict from coalition forces came out of an attraction to Kuwait's oil production. Oil is in increasing demand within the Western World and it is not surprising that many see it as a strong underlying motive for – or at least, a significant factor in – the Coalition's engagement. This is summed up very well by Finlan, who states,

“ The critical issue that transformed the situation in the Gulf from a regional dispute into a full-blown international crisis was, above all, the substantial oil reserves in that area and the world's dependence on this ‘ black gold.’ If left to his own devices, Saddam Hussein possessed the ability to have influence over, or outright control of, 40 per cent of the known oil supplies on the planet by combining his own reserves with Kuwait and possibly, that of Saudi Arabia.” (Finlan, 2003: 9).

In addition, it has been proposed here shown that air power had a significant role to play in the war and its eventual conclusion. The Iraqi Air Force were no match for the advanced technology at the disposal of the Coalition military,

made clear during the extensive bombing campaign and also from the defensive strategy which the Iraqi army were forced to take. It has been this essay's objective to provide evidence for the contention that the role of air power was considerable. Without the serious impact the bombing campaign had on the Iraqi forces and the Iraq infrastructure, no one knows how the Gulf War would have developed, how long it would have lasted, and what other consequences there might have been.

Many lives were lost and it was clear that the Iraqi Government could not compete with the sheer scale of its opponents or stop the devastating impact on its civilians. The aftermath of the Gulf War therefore had a considerable impact upon the Iraqi Government. Arguably, the most significant effect of the war was on the economy, as the war “ produced serious hardships to the people and set the economy back to 19th Century status” (Alnasrawi, 2000: 89-119). Many academics working in this field believe that, the Gulf War laid the foundations for the more recent ‘ Iraq War’ in 2003, which extends its significance even further to say the least.

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