

## Iraq – Its History prior to the first Gulf War: Monarchy, Republic, Dictatorship...

Ottoman rule over Iraq lasted until the Great War (World War I) when the Ottomans sided with Germany and the Central Powers. British forces invaded the country and suffered a major defeat at the hands of the Turkish army during the Siege of Kut (1915–16). British forces regrouped and captured Baghdad in 1917. An armistice was signed in 1918.



Iraq was carved out of the Ottoman Empire by the French and British as agreed in the Sykes-Picot Agreement. On 11 November 1920 it became a League of Nations mandate under British control with the name "State of Iraq".

Britain imposed a Hāshimite monarchy on Iraq and defined the territorial limits of Iraq without taking into account the politics of the different ethnic and religious groups in the country, in particular those of the Kurds to the north. During the British occupation the Shiates and Kurds fought for independence. Britain used chemical weapons (white phosphorus bombs) against Kurdish villagers in the revolt, an early application of aerial bombing.

In the Mandate period and beyond, the British supported the traditional, Sunni leadership (such as the tribal *shaykhs*) over the growing, urban-based nationalist movement. The Land Settlement Act gave the tribal shaykhs the right to register the communal tribal lands in their own name. The Tribal Disputes Regulations gave them judiciary rights, whereas the Peasants' Rights and Duties Act of 1933 severely reduced the tenants', forbidding them to leave the land unless all their debts to the landlord had been settled. The British resorted to military force when their interests were threatened, as in the 1941 Rashīd `Alī al-Gaylānī coup. This coup led to a British invasion of Iraq using forces from the British Indian Army and the Arab Legion from Jordan.

## Iraqi monarchy

Emir Faisal, leader of the Arab revolt against the Ottoman sultān during the Great War, and member of the Sunni Hashimite family from Mecca, became the first king of the new state. He obtained the throne partly by the influence of T. E. Lawrence. Although the monarch was legitimized and proclaimed King by a plebiscite in 1921, nominal independence was only achieved in 1932, when the British Mandate officially ended.

In 1927, huge oil fields were discovered near Kirkuk and brought economic improvement. Exploration rights were granted to the Iraqi Petroleum Company, which despite the name, was a British oil company. King Faisal I was succeeded by his son Ghazi in December 1933. King Ghazi's reign lasted five and a half years. He claimed Iraqi sovereignty over Kuwait. An avid amateur racer, the king drove his car into a lamppost and died 3 April 1939. His son Faisal followed him to the throne.

King Faisal II (1935 – 1958) was the only son of King Ghazi I and Queen `Aliyah. The new king was four when his father died. His uncle 'Abd al-Ilah became regent (April 1939 – May 1953).

In 1945, Iraq joined the United Nations and became a founding member of the Arab League. At the same time, the Kurdish leader Mustafā Barzānī led a rebellion against the central government in Baghdad. After the failure of the uprising Barzānī and his followers fled to the Soviet Union.

In 1948, Iraq and five other Arab countries fought a war against the newly-declared State of Israel. Iraq was not a party to the cease-fire agreement signed in May 1949. The war had a negative impact on Iraq's economy. The government had to allocate 40 percent of available funds to the army and for the Palestinian refugees. Oil royalties paid to Iraq were halved when the pipeline to Haifa was cut. The war and the hanging of several Jewish businessmen led to the departure of most of Iraq's Jewish community.

Iraq signed the Baghdad Pact in 1956. It allied Iraq, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, and the United Kingdom. Its headquarters were in Baghdad. The Pact constituted a direct challenge to Egyptian president Gamal Abdal Nasser. In response, Nasser launched a media campaign that challenged the legitimacy of the Iraqi monarchy.

In February 1958, King Hussein of Jordan and `Abd al-Ilāh proposed a union of Hāshimite monarchies to counter the recently formed Egyptian-Syrian union. The prime minister Nuri as-Said wanted Kuwait to be part of the proposed Arab-Hāshimite Union. Shaykh `Abd-Allāh as-Salīm, the ruler of Kuwait, was invited to Baghdad to discuss Kuwait's future. This policy brought the government of Iraq into direct conflict with Britain, which did not want to grant independence to Kuwait. At that point, the monarchy

found itself completely isolated. Nuri as-Said was able to contain the rising discontent only by resorting to ever greater political oppression.

## **Iraqi republic**

Inspired by Nasser, officers from the Nineteenth Brigade known as "Free Officers", under the leadership of Brigadier Abdul-Karim Qassem (known as "*az-Za`īm*", 'the leader') and Colonel Abdul Salam Arif overthrew the Hashimite monarchy on 14 July 1958. King Faisal II and `Abd al-Ilāh were executed in the gardens of ar-Rihāb Palace. Their bodies (and those of many others in the royal family) were displayed in public. Nuri as-Said evaded capture for one day, but after attempting to escape disguised as a veiled woman, he was caught and shot.

The new government proclaimed Iraq to be a republic and rejected the idea of a union with Jordan. Iraq's activity in the Baghdād Pact ceased.

When Qāsim distanced himself from `Abd an-Nāsir, he faced growing opposition from pro-Egypt officers in the Iraqi army. `Arif, who wanted closer cooperation with Egypt, was stripped of his responsibilities and thrown in prison.

When the garrison in Mosul rebelled against Qāsim's policies, he allowed the Kurdish leader Barzānī to return from exile in the Soviet Union to help suppress the pro-Nāsir rebels.

In 1961, Kuwait gained independence from Britain and Iraq claimed sovereignty over Kuwait. Britain reacted strongly to Iraq's claim and sent troops to Kuwait to deter Iraq. Qāsim was forced to back down and in October 1963, Iraq recognized the sovereignty of Kuwait.

A period of considerable instability followed. Qāsim was assassinated in February 1963, when the Ba'ath Party took power under the leadership of General Ahmed Hasan al-Bakr (prime minister) and Colonel Abdul Salam Arif (president). Nine months later `Abd as-Salam Muhammad `Arif led a successful coup against the Ba'ath government. On 13 April 1966, President Abdul Salam Arif died in a helicopter crash and was succeeded by his brother, General Abdul Rahman Arif. Following the Six Day War of 1967, the Ba'ath Party felt strong enough to retake power (17 July 1968). Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr became president and chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC).

In 1967-1968 Iraqi communists launched an insurgency in southern Iraq.<sup>[1]</sup>

Barzānī and the Kurds who had begun a rebellion in 1961 were still causing problems in 1969. The secretary-general of the Ba`th party, Saddam Hussein, was given responsibility to find a solution. It was clear that it was impossible to defeat the Kurds by military means and in 1970 a political agreement was reached between the rebels and the Iraqi government.

Iraq's economy recovered sharply after the 1968 revolution. The Arif brothers had spent close to 90% of the national budget on the army but the Ba'ath government gave priority to agriculture and industry. The British Iraq Petroleum Company monopoly was broken when a new contract was signed with ERAP, a major French oil company. Later the IPC was nationalised. As a result of these policies Iraq experienced rapid economic growth.

During the 1970s, border disputes with Iran and Kuwait caused many problems. Kuwait's refusal to allow Iraq to build a harbour in the Shatt al-Arab delta strengthened Iraq's belief that conservative powers in the region were trying to control the Persian Gulf. Iran's occupation of numerous islands in the Strait of Hormuz didn't help alter Iraq's fears. The border disputes between Iraq and Iran were temporarily resolved with the signing of the Algiers Accord on 6 March 1975.

In 1972 an Iraqi delegation visited Moscow. The same year diplomatic relations with the US were restored. Relations with Jordan and Syria were good. Iraqi troops were stationed in both countries. During the 1973 October War, Iraqi divisions engaged Israeli forces.

In retrospect, the 1970s can be seen as a high point in Iraq's modern history. A new, young, technocratic elite was governing the country and the fast-growing economy brought prosperity and stability. Many Arabs outside Iraq considered it an example. However, the following decades would not be as favorable for the fledgling country.

## Under Saddam

In July 1979, president Ahmed Hassan Al-Bakr resigned, and his chosen successor, Saddam Hussein, assumed the offices of both President and Chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council. He was the de facto ruler of Iraq for some years before he formally came to power.

Territorial disputes with Iran led to an inconclusive and costly eight-year war, the *Iran-Iraq War* (1980 – 1988, termed *Qādisiyyat-Saddām* – 'Saddam's Qādisiyyah'), which devastated the economy. Iraq declared victory in 1988 but actually achieved a weary return to the *status quo ante bellum*. The war left Iraq with the largest military establishment in the Persian Gulf region but with huge debts and an ongoing rebellion by Kurdish elements in the northern mountains. The government suppressed the rebellion by using weapons on civilian targets.

A mass chemical weapons attack on the city of Halabja in March 1988 during the Iran-Iraq War is usually attributed to Saddam's regime, although responsibility for the attack is a matter of some dispute<sup>[2]</sup>. Saddam maintained his innocence in this matter until his execution in December 2006. Almost all current accounts of the incident regard the Iraqi regime as the party responsible for the gas attack (as opposed to Iran), and the event has become iconic in depictions of Saddam's cruelty. Estimates of casualties range from several hundred to at least 7,000 people. The Iraqi government continued to be supported by a broad international community including most of the West, the Soviet Union, and the People's Republic of China, which continued sending arms shipments to combat Iran.

Indeed, shipments from the US (though always a minority) increased after this date, and the UK awarded £400 million in trade credits to Iraq ten days after condemning the massacre [3].

In the late 1970s, Iraq purchased a French nuclear reactor, dubbed Osirak or Tammuz 1. Construction began in 1979. In 1980, the reactor site suffered minor damage due to an Iranian air strike, and in 1981, before the reactor could be completed, it was destroyed by the Israeli Air Force (see Operation Opera), greatly setting back Iraq's nuclear weapons program.