

GULF CONFLICT - I

Saddam's rise and rise

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The war in the Persian Gulf has begun. He would be a brave man who would predict the final outcome of the complex crisis of the war. This war has several stakes, some immediate and others which one can call, long-term repercussions. It is an unequal war between a super power in military terms, USA and a threshold power Iraq.

The immediate provocation was the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990. This has brought worldwide condemnation from all countries who have called for the immediate withdrawal of Iraqi troops from Kuwait. But Iraq stays put, and has decided to go to war as well. Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi President is quoted saying: "This is our Kuwait and we will live and die for it."

On 8 August, Saddam Hussein having annexed Kuwait followed it by speedy integration of this affluent pocket, bulging with petro-dollars, dripping with oil, as Iraq's nineteenth province.

A look at the world map would show Iraq as a largely land-locked state, with an inadequate shoreline of hardly 30 kms. It was during its nine year old war with Iran that Iraq was made sharply aware of its vulnerability.

Iraq's most recent claims on Kuwait go back to 1961. Iraq underwent a national revolution by overthrowing a foreign imposed monarchy in 1958. Iraq oriented herself along radical socialist, but secular lines. The feeling of nationality in an otherwise ethnically fragmented nation was fostered by those of the ruling elite.

Saddam Hussein al-Takriti's rise to power started in 1959. He made an unsuccessful attempt on the life of Prime Minister Qasem. He achieved a hero's status when he escaped to Syria with an injured leg. He later went to Cairo and graduated from the university. Nasser's Pan-Arabism appealed to Saddam, who through the Baath (Resurrection) Party organised another attempt. He succeeded on 8 February, 1963 in overthrowing Qasem, but their rule was only short-lived for nine months. Finally in 1968, the party seized power and has been in power since then.

The Baath Party consolidated its hold over a deeply rooted ethnic and sectarianly affiliated groups into more cohesive societies. Nevertheless, troubles broke out in Iraq. The

rise of Khomeini inspired the leaderless Shi'is to voice their protest in a more confident way than ever before. In Iraq, the Ba'ath secular Sunni regime feared a sectarian conflict, similar to that which had taken place in the history of Islam of the ninth and tenth centuries A.D.

The Shi'ah community, who form about 60 percent of Iraq's 13 million inhabitants, populate the wealth-producing southern rural part of the country. They form a demographic buffer between the rest of the Gulf and the 'Sunni Triangle' (the area ranging from Baghdad to Mosul in the north and down to Rutbah in the west and which does not contain any of Iraq's oilfields). This area is economically backward, so at the centre of the Khomeini challenge to the Ba'athist regime lie religious and economic grievances.

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During the nine-year war between Iraq and Iran, the differences between the Sunnis and the Shi'ahs to the fore. In July 1979, the purge conducted against all Shi'ite leaders and ministers, followed in the rise to presidency of Saddam Hussein. Most of the top leaders of Shi'i body known as the Islamic Call (al-Da'wah al-Islamiyah) party were executed like Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr. This war also brought to the forefront another festering problem of Iraq's restless Kurds.

It is during this war that both this super-powers USA and the USSR supported Iraq. USSR had a military pact and USA turned a blind eye to Saddam's human rights violations against his minorities. In launching the war against Iran, Saddam Hussein appears to have had two related objects. One, to relieve his regime from Khomeini's challenge by humiliating him and setting in motion a process for his collapse. Two, to project himself as the new unrivalled regional power in the Gulf, if not in the Arab world.

In the meantime, Saddam mended his fences with the west, especially improved Iraq's ties with West European states at the expense of his patron - the USSR. Iraq's membership of the Non-Aligned Movement made the shift easier. Saddam projected Iraq's war with Iran as 'Qadisiyat Saddam', recalling the war fought in 636 A.D. in which the victorious Arabs precipitated the downfall of the Persian empire. The war was long-drawn with very little success. Iraq's invasion revealed Iran's military weakness which initially pleased the west especially USA and the Gulf Sheikdoms.

In the war, Kuwait, which is strategically wedged between Iraq and Iran feared the consequences of being sucked in. Hence to ward off Iraqi anger to its neutral stand, Kuwait paid Iraq ten billion dollars. This war cost Iraq a lot of manpower, money and resources. The Israelis air raid on 7 June 1981 which destroyed Iraq's newly constructed nuclear reactor, dealt a blow to Saddam's already waning prestige. One thing was obvious: the economic cost of the stagnant war could deny the Ba'athist regime the support it was gathering among the poorer segment of the population, the bulk of who are Shi'is.

Added to these internal problems, Iraq's foreign debts exceeded eighty billion dollars. At the last OPEC meeting, before the annexation of Kuwait, Saddam succeeded in raising the oil price from 15 to 21 dollars a barrel. Not content with this, he revived Iraq's territorial claims over Kuwait, accusing her of colluding with a western power to sabotage Arab unity and of stealing oil from Iraq's Rumailah oil field.

To be continued