# The Dynamics of Political Turmoil in Iraq: US Intervention from the Gulf War to the Fall of Saddam Hussein

**Ainiyatul Latifah[1], Endah Kurniati[2], Khalid Vikriadi[3]**
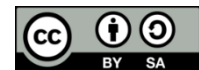[1,2,3] Universitas Bangka Belitung

| Article Info | ABSTRACT |
|---|---|
| | This paper analyzes the political dynamics of Iraq from the 1991 Gulf War to the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003 in the context of US intervention. The article uses a qualitative approach with a geopolitical and historical analysis of US foreign policy in the Middle East. The study shows that US military intervention, framed within the discourse of democratization, was actually aimed at maintaining political and economic hegemony over oil resources in the Persian Gulf region. The embargo policy, ongoing war, and military invasion led to the destruction of Iraq's socio-political structure and gave rise to prolonged instability. This study emphasizes that political transformation imposed from outside without understanding local social and historical complexities only results in national disintegration. |

*Corresponding Author:*

Name: Endah Kurniati
Institution: Universitas Bangka Belitung
Email: endah-kurniati@ubb.ac.id

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Before becoming the modern country of Iraq, the region now located in the Middle East was the center of a great world civilization known as Mesopotamia, a term from Greek meaning "the area between two rivers", namely the Tigris and the Euphrates. The fertile and open geographical conditions make this region strategic as a trade route between Asia and the Mediterranean, and have made it a target for great powers from the time of the Sumerians, Akkadians, to the Persian and Roman empires. Mesopotamia's natural wealth, once fertile soil, has transformed into oil wealth in the modern era, prompting the intervention of global powers. Modern Iraq, the heir to Mesopotamian history, has never been free from the tug-of-war between domestic and foreign interests. It was in this context that Saddam Hussein emerged, the Iraqi president who, at the beginning of his reign, nationalized the oil industry in 1972 and presented Iraq as a powerful nation in the Gulf region.

Mesopotamia itself is an open area and its borders are easily accessible, so it is

often used as a strategic trade route, especially from Asia to the Mediterranean, becoming a destination for humans to settle and build civilization, and becoming a target for invasion by external powers. The proverb says, "Where there's sugar, there are ants." This expression seems to refer to what happened in this region from its time as Mesopotamia to its present-day Iraq. In ancient times, humans fought for control of Mesopotamia, which was fertile along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. In the modern era, as Mesopotamia evolved into a nation-state, oil has become a key issue.

Saddam Hussein was one of the Iraqi presidents who had a significant influence on Iraq. In 1972, he nationalized many foreign-owned oil companies. Under Saddam Hussein's leadership, Iraq emerged as a powerful nation, but this was not without conflict. The conflict during Saddam Hussein's reign was largely dominated by Saddam's political violence against his political opponents, both nationally and internationally. Nationally, the conflict stemmed from Saddam Hussein's power structure, built on close kinship and shared ideology. Through kinship ties, Saddam sought to enlist his confidants from Tikrik, his hometown. Ideologically, he built his power on the ideology of Islamic socialism, embodied in the Baath Party and based on Sunni Islamic primordialism. The Shia, who constitute the majority of Iraq's population, became a marginalized group.

Saddam Hussein's concern about the influence of the Iranian Revolution reflected the long-standing historical tensions between Mesopotamia and the Persian plateau, a civilizational rivalry rooted in millennia. In this context, the United States' support for Iraq in the 1980s can be seen as a form of global power involvement in a regional conflict with deep historical and geopolitical dimensions. US intervention in the Gulf War was not solely driven by oil interests but also represented a recurring pattern in the history of the struggle for resources and influence in the "Fertile Crescent." While Mesopotamia was once coveted for its fertile soil, in the modern era, its primary wealth lies in oil, the lifeblood of the global economy. By invading Kuwait, Saddam Hussein was essentially seeking to seize control of the world's energy hub, just as the ancient rulers of Mesopotamia had sought to control vital trade routes—a move that ultimately led to the involvement of the "modern empire," the United States, in maintaining an energy-based global order [1].

United States interventions, both in the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 invasion of Iraq that led to the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, were rooted in geopolitical and economic interests closely linked to oil. From a geopolitical perspective, these steps reflected the US's efforts to maintain its position as a hegemonic power by preventing the emergence of regional actors that could potentially challenge its influence in the Middle East. Meanwhile, economically, the Persian Gulf region serves as a vital hub for global energy supplies. The dominance of Iraq—which possesses one of the world's largest oil reserves—over its own resources is considered a threat to the stability of global oil supplies and prices [2]. Thus, US intervention can be understood as a strategy to protect its national interests through controlling strategic areas while ensuring control over the world's economic axis, which is highly dependent on energy.

The study of the United States intervention in Iraq is significant because it reveals the dynamics of global power at play in the Middle East. Through an analysis of this intervention, we can understand how national interests, energy security, and global dominance inform the formation of a superpower's foreign policy. This research also offers a critical perspective for assessing the long-term impact of foreign involvement on a country's domestic stability and the regional order as a whole. The case of Iraq offers valuable lessons that remain relevant today, illustrating the clash between the complex heritage of ancient civilizations and the geopolitical interests of modern global powers, resulting in a fragile and tense political environment.

## 2. METHODS

The research method used in this study is a qualitative method that integrates historical and descriptive-analytical approaches to gain an in-depth and contextual understanding. Methodologically, this research can be analyzed through the theoretical framework of Realism in international relations, which emphasizes the struggle for power and national interests in global politics, to explain US dominance. The historical approach is applied to trace the roots, development, and dynamics of the phenomenon over time, while the descriptive-analytical approach serves to systematically describe the characteristics of the phenomenon and analyze the relationships between its various components to identify patterns and draw conclusions. By using qualitative research methods through historical and descriptive-analytical approaches to data from literature, official documents, and media analysis, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the forms, motives, and impacts of US intervention in Iraq from the Gulf War to the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first thing to highlight is that various acts of domestic violence against women stem from a misconception about the concept of marriage, which assumes that the husband absolutely owns his wife. Therefore:

### 3.1 Realism and Hegemony Theory: US Dominance

From the perspective of the theory of realism in international relations, the dominance of the United States in various regions of the world can be understood as a logical consequence of the country's efforts to maintain its existence and expand its power in an anarchic global system, which is then strengthened through the implementation of a hegemonic strategy.

Realism starts from the assumption that the international system lacks a supreme authority capable of regulating the behavior of states, thus creating anarchy. In this situation, states become the primary actors, relying on their own capabilities (self-help) to ensure survival. Realists view states as rational, singular entities that always act in their national interests, with security and survival as their primary priorities.

The roots of realist thought can be traced back to Thucydides' "History of the Peloponnesian War," which describes how power and fear are the primary drivers of interstate conflict. This thinking was furthered by Niccolò Machiavelli in "The Prince," which emphasized the importance of a realistic attitude and a leader's readiness to do whatever it takes to defend the state. In the 20th century, Hans Morgenthau formulated modern realism by emphasizing that the fundamental human nature of selfishness and power-orientedness underpins all political action, aimed at maintaining or expanding influence [3].

The anarchic nature of the international system forces states to continually strengthen their military and economic capabilities. This focus on national security explains phenomena such as arms races and the formation of strategic alliances, as seen in the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Kenneth Waltz later updated this approach through neorealism, or structural realism, which shifts explanations from human nature to the structure of the international system as the primary factor in state behavior [4].

Within a realist framework, hegemony refers to the political, economic, and military dominance of one state over another, both regionally and globally. Unlike imperialism, hegemony does not necessarily involve direct control over another state's domestic affairs. Antonio Gramsci expanded on this concept by emphasizing that hegemony is not simply coercive, but also created through consent—where the political leadership and ideology of a dominant class are voluntarily accepted by society, making it appear as the normal and legitimate order [5].

The United States' dominance in the Asia-Pacific region is reflected in its role in maintaining regional security and stability.

As a hegemonic power, the US plays a central role in addressing transnational threats such as terrorism, evident through its military support and defense cooperation with its allies, such as the Philippines' handling of the Marawi crisis. From a neorealist perspective, this step is a strategy to maintain its existence and influence in the strategic region. Furthermore, another form of US hegemony can be seen through the concept of benevolent hegemony, in which the hegemonic state provides public goods to countries within its sphere of influence. For example, the post-World War II Marshall Plan not only helped the economic recovery of Western Europe but also strengthened political stability that supported US interests.[6]A similar hegemonic model also contributed to stability and economic growth in East Asia, particularly in Japan and South Korea after the Korean War.

According to John Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism, a state should strive for regional hegemony to ensure its security, but the application of this concept poses a dilemma for a country like Indonesia. Efforts to strengthen the military and build strategic alliances to confront major powers may conflict with the principle of an independent and active foreign policy that rejects ties to any power bloc, while increasing defense spending risks sacrificing social and economic development. In a global context, the dominance of the United States reflects the principles of realism, where superpowers act rationally to maximize their power and security in an anarchic international system.[7]US hegemony is maintained through a combination of hard power in the form of military strength and soft power through economic and ideological influence, while adapting to changes in the balance of global power, particularly with the emergence of China as a major competitor.

### 3.2 Humanitarian Intervention Theory or Modern Imperialism: Moral and Political Legitimacy of Intervention

Humanitarian Intervention Theory can be understood as the use or threat of military force by one state against another with the primary goal of stopping serious and widespread human rights violations. This intervention focuses on protecting individuals who are not citizens of the intervening party and is carried out without the consent of the targeted state. Its conceptual roots can be traced back to the tradition of customary international law, dating back to the thought of Hugo Grotius and 17th-century European political practice.[8]. Some early examples include the British, French, and Russian intervention in the Greek War of Independence in 1827, and the deployment of a multinational force to Lebanon following the Druze-Maronite conflict of 1860 [9].

Despite the moral basis for protecting humanity, the legitimacy of such interventions has long sparked philosophical and political debate. John Stuart Mill, a Victorian-era liberal philosopher, once advocated the idea of humanitarian intervention in his 1859 essay "A Few Words on Non-Intervention," although his views often had imperialist overtones, regarding colonized peoples as "savages" who needed to be conquered for the sake of civilization.[10]In the modern context, humanitarian intervention presents a dilemma between respect for state sovereignty—a core principle of the UN system—and the global commitment to the protection of human rights. Kofi Annan highlighted this dilemma in his 2000 Millennium Report, questioning how the world should respond to human rights violations without disregarding state sovereignty. This tension resurfaced following the NATO intervention in Kosovo (1999) and the military operation in Libya (2011) [11].

Critics view humanitarian intervention as a form of Modern Imperialism that uses moral pretexts to mask the geopolitical and economic interests of powerful nations. In general, imperialism can be understood as a nation's policy of expanding its influence and power over other nations, either through military conquest or economic and cultural domination. In the

contemporary context, this practice takes a more subtle form than traditional colonialism. Modern Imperialism manifests itself not only through direct political control but also through economic and cultural mechanisms. Economic Imperialism manifests itself in the control of other nations' resources and markets through investment and the creation of economic dependency, while Cultural Imperialism works by spreading the values, lifestyles, and products of the dominant nation to establish hegemony that influences the mindset and behavior of people in the target nation [12].

Historically, imperialist powers have often used various ideologies to legitimize their expansion and domination over other nations. One prominent justification is Social Darwinism, which falsely adapts the concept of "survival of the fittest" from biology to a social context to argue that the perceived stronger race or nation has a natural right to subjugate the weaker [13]. Furthermore, the notion of a civilizing mission was used as a moral pretext to spread Western values, Christianity, and the colonial education system, while in practice it actually suppressed local languages and cultures. In the contemporary context, research examining the situation in Indonesia highlights that the United States seeks to maintain its hegemony through a variety of strategies, ranging from subtle intelligence operations to overt military intervention [14]. This finding confirms that modern imperialism is not always manifested in the form of physical colonization, but rather through more covert political, economic, and cultural control, thus creating a long-term relationship of dependence between the center and the periphery.

In analyzing claims about humanitarian intervention, it is important to critically examine whether such actions are carried out with moral consistency or are selective, and the extent to which the stated humanitarian motives are accompanied by hidden strategic and economic interests. Some critics argue that humanitarian interventions often lack clear international legal legitimacy, tend to be implemented against weak states, and achieve ambiguous or contradictory objectives. These concerns stem from the view that humanitarian rhetoric can be used as a political instrument to justify interventions that are actually geopolitically and economically motivated, thus blurring the distinction between humanitarian protection and the expansion of power [15].

In conclusion, Humanitarian Intervention Theory stands in inherent tension with the concept of Modern Imperialism. While there is a strong moral justification for action in the face of gross human rights violations, the practice of selective intervention demonstrates the need for skepticism toward humanitarian claims made by great powers. In this context, understanding the forms of modern imperialism, whether economic, cultural, or technological, provides a crucial analytical framework for distinguishing between genuinely humanitarian interventions and covertly hegemonic actions.

**Discussion**
**Shatt al-Arab Issues in the Gulf War**

Oil was first discovered in Iran (Persia) in 1908, and the following year, the Anglo Persian Company was founded. As for Iraq, a very large oil field was discovered in the city of Kirkuk in 1927, and the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC) was founded in the same year. In both Iran and Iraq, oil is a key commodity in their economic development. Iran and Iraq are the two largest oil producing countries, second only to Saudi Arabia. However, Iraq is at a disadvantage in this competition. Iraq's coastline is less than 50 km, making it less than ideal for oil tanker traffic. Iran, on the other hand, has a much longer coastline along the Persian Gulf, supported by the Gulf's extension, a deep river mouth at the confluence of the Euphrates and Tigris called the Shatt al-Arab (Swearingen, 1988, p. 408)Iraq, which felt aggrieved, used the Shatt al-Arab as a pretext for conflict with Iran, and on the other hand, this border issue was also a problem of different perceptions between the British colonies in Iraq and Iran after the collapse of the Ottoman government. Iraq actually

planned to control the Shatt al-Arab to use it as a port and transit point for oil tankers before they transported them out across the open sea, but because the Shatt al-Arab was closer to Iran, Iraq's hopes were dashed.

The border conflict over the Shatt al-Arab lasted from 1969 to 1975. However, in 1973 Iraq actually obtained rights to the Shatt Al-Arab, but since the end of World War II, Iran has increasingly violated the border and the country's ships, especially tankers, often enter the Shatt Al-Arab without permission. During this period, Kuwait, previously part of Mesopotami, gained independence from the British protectorate and became an independent nation separate from Iraq. Kuwait became embroiled in a border dispute when it refused to allow Iraq to build a port in the Shatt al-Arab Delta. This refusal led Iraq to believe that a conservative power was seeking control of the Persian Gulf. Iraqi concerns continued when Iran began occupying several islands in the Strait of Hormuz. The tension of the border conflict could not be avoided until in 1974, at the Arab League Summit, negotiations were held between Iraq and Iran with the mediator being King Hussein of Jordan. The negotiations continued at the OPEC Summit, where Saddam Hussein – who was then serving as vice president of Iraq – and the Shah of Iran signed the Algiers agreement to temporarily calm the conflict between the two countries, Iraq and Iran, on March 6, 1975. Iraq agreed to the general rules given by Iran regarding the Shatt al-Arab, and in return Iran stopped supporting the Kurdish rebellion in northern Iraq.

The Shatt al-Arab is a key geopolitical channel in the region, as its waters are deep enough to support giant oil tankers. The abundance of oil and natural gas offers significant economic promise in the Middle East, necessitating the development of infrastructure to optimize the potential profits from oil, including the construction of ports (Karsh, 2022, p. 258). On the other hand, the Shatt Al-Arab is also strategically located as a military base to eradicate the Kurdistan, a Kurdish tribe that dominates northern Iraq and frequently rebels against the government.

Iraq has openly repressed the Kurdish separatist movement since 1963. Iraq's desire for the Shatt al-Arab heated up when in 1979 Masoud Barzani, a high-ranking Kurdistan military official at the time, and his brother Idris Barzani decided to establish relations with Iran in order to repel Iraq and gain support for the revolution. As a result, relations between Iraq and Iran worsened, which later also became the trigger for the Iran-Iraq War.

The year 1979 marked a new chapter in the Iraq-Iran conflict. The Iranian monarchy collapsed in February 1979, and the Iranian people prepared for the new regime and a wave of revolution that reached Shia Iraq. The situation worsened when, in June 1979, the supreme leader of Iraq's Shia Muslims, Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, was arrested and taken to Tehran. The previous year, Ayatollah Kohomeini had been expelled from Baghdad in October 1978. The conflict with the Shia intensified, and violence against demonstrators became inevitable in Shia Iraq (Legrenzi & Gause III, 2016, p. 307). In the midst of this conflict, in July 1979 President Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr of Iraq resigned and was replaced by Saddam Hussein, a Sunni-socialist. In addition to being the president of Iraq, following the example of Soviet President Joseph Stalin, Saddam Hussein also served as Chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council, Secretary General of the Baath Party, Prime Minister, and Commander-in-Chief of the Iraqi Armed Forces.

In response to the Iraqi government's violence against Shia demonstrators, Ayatollah M. Baqir al-Sadr called for strong resistance against the regime, and shortly thereafter, the main Shia political group announced the "Islamic Liberation Movement," which set out to overthrow the Baathist regime by any means necessary. On April 1, 1980, there was an assassination attempt by the Shia opposition on Prime Minister Tariq Aziz. In retaliation, the Iraqi government executed Ayatollah M. Baqir al-Sadr and expelled tens of thousands of Iraqi Shia from Iran. Finally, in mid-1980, Saddam Hussein vowed war and refused to submit to

Khomeini. In response, Ayatollah Khomeini called on the Iraqi people—the majority of whom were Shia—to overthrow the Baathist regime and accused the Baathists of waging a war "against Islam." Khomeini's resistance was also illustrated by his statements regarding the Iraqi government as a puppet of Satan and his call for an Islamic Revolution. This was also a response to Saddam Hussein's statement that the Persians would not be able to take revenge on the Arabs since the Battle of Al-Qadisiyah in the 7th century, which toppled the ancient Persian Empire.

Saddam Hussein—even as Vice President—maneuvered to position Iraq as a pivotal country in the Arab world. He sponsored the Arab summits of 1978, 1979, and 1980 that led to the Arab Charter in Baghdad and sought to build his image as a figure loyal to Arabs and Sunnis Under Saddam Hussein's leadership, Iraq became a wealthy and powerful nation with a large economy and military. Iraq's oil revenues reached over $896 million, and continued to soar alongside rising world oil prices. Saddam Hussein's success gave rise to greater ambitions to become the leader of the Arab world. However, Saddam Hussein's leadership style at the time faced new tensions in the Iraq-Iran conflict, where Saddam Hussein, from the secular Baath Party, promoted the idea of Pan-Arabism (a combination of Soviet socialism and Arab nationalism). Meanwhile, the Iranian Islamic Revolution promoted transnational Islamism to counter the US, which was perceived as oppressing Islam.

Observers of Middle Eastern history and geopolitics have argued over the reasons for the Iraq-Iran war. As mentioned above, one of the key issues is the Shatt al-Arab border conflict, in which Saddam Hussein canceled the Algiers Agreement, which stipulated joint management and use of the Shatt al-Arab and prohibited militarization of the region (Alfin Febrian Basundoro, 2019, p. 6). The termination was because Saddam considered that Iran had openly violated the agreement by militarizing the border since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The next cause was the real rivalry between Sunni and Shiite

Muslims which Saddam Hussein expressed by expelling Khomeini from Najaf, the holy Shiite city where he was exiled. Meanwhile, the Islamist Khomeini viewed Saddam Hussein and his Baath Party as a secularist movement that could endanger the spirit of the Islamic Revolution.

The conflict between Saddam and Khomeini also continued in the opposing ideologies of Pan-Arabism based on Arab nationalism and Soviet Socialism with the Islamic Revolution of Iran. Egypt, Libya, Iraq, and Syria witnessed the rise of the Pan-Arab movement aimed at uniting Arabs in fighting Arab enemies. Meanwhile, Khomeini emphasized that the Islamic Revolution of Iran aimed to unite all Muslims and did not side with any ideology, be it the Western or Eastern Bloc, especially against the US which in Khomeini's view had oppressed the Iranian people and Islam in general.

### Iraq-Iran War

Before becoming a modern nation, in his book, The Longest War, Dilip Hiro explains the roots of the conflict between Iran and Iraq. The rivalry between Iraq and Iran can be traced back to the Ottoman Dynasty (1517-1918) and the Safavid Dynasty (1517-1722) in Persia. Iraq was the easternmost province of the Ottoman Empire, and Iran was the center of the Safavid Dynasty. The conflict between the two revolved around border issues and Safavid intervention, which sought access to Shiite holy cities in Iraq, such as Karbala.

The Iraq-Iran War, from an Iraqi perspective, began on September 4, 1980, when Iranian forces shelled Iraqi towns and villages along the border. Iran and some Iraqi observers believe the war began on September 22, 1980, when Iraq launched a full-scale invasion of Iran. Iran claims that from March 1979 to September 1980, it experienced 434 attacks by the Iraqi military and 363 airspace violations, while Iraq claims that it experienced 544 attacks and airspace violations during the same period since the Iranian Revolution (Swearingen, 1988, p. 405). The Iraqi attack on Iran had at least two objectives: to prevent the spread of the Iranian

Revolution and to take over oil regions, especially in Khuzistan, a region with a predominantly Arab ethnic composition.

Iraq's first strategy was to attack 10 Iranian air bases to destroy their fighter jets, a strategy learned from Israeli tactics during wars with the Arab world. However, the attack failed because Iran had protected its aircraft with special hangars. Early in the war, Iraqi forces bombarded Iranian forces. Iran, militarily weaker at the time of the Iraqi attack, mobilized its population to join the fight against the Iraqi attack, which had devastated its country. Iran's lack of weapons and the support of major socialist powers like the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, as well as Arab states like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, convinced Saddam Hussein that Iraq would win. Furthermore, Iran was no longer on good terms with the US, so the US also supported Iraq and supplied it with weapons.

Iraq's attacks on Iran failed to meet Saddam Hussein's expectations of either halting the Islamic Revolution or taking control of southwestern Iran. Iranian counterattacks always succeeded in expelling Iraqi troops from Iranian territory. Even when Ayatollah Khomeini was faced with the choice of ending the war—with a victory for Iran—and establishing a ceasefire, he preferred to continue the attacks until the collapse of the Baath Party in Baghdad. For years, Iran spent most of its time conducting attacks on Iraq.

During the Iraq-Iran war, US policy shifted toward Iraq. Following the missile attacks on Tehran, the US Navy became directly involved in the war, protecting oil tankers from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia from Iranian attacks. Along with the Soviet Union and the Arab League, Ronald Reagan announced his support for Iraq in 1982. However, the US also secretly supplied weapons to Iran, while also supplying and encouraging its allies (Britain and France) to supply weapons to Iraq. Adnan Khashoggi was a broker for illegal US arms sales to Iran, as the US officially maintained an embargo on Iran.

On July 20, 1987, the UN Security Council adopted resolution 598, calling for a ceasefire and calling for both sides to return to their respective borders. On October 8, 1987, US helicopters fired on and sank three Iranian gunboats after one was shot down by Iran. In mid-October 1987, a US tanker caught fire in Kuwaiti waters after being fired upon by Iranian missiles. The following day, the US-flagged Kuwaiti ship Sea Isle City was also hit by Iranian missiles in Kuwaiti waters. The US retaliated by firing on the Iranian oil rig Rasyadat.

On July 3, 1988, the United States further weakened Iran by shooting down an Iranian civilian airliner, killing all 290 passengers. The United States argued that the plane had not signaled it was a civilian aircraft, but Dubai defended Iran, stating that Iran had announced a civilian flight via radio. During this crisis, Iran received several peace offers. Initially, Khomeini refused to make peace with Saddam because Saddam would only make peace when he was weak. Then Iran put forward several conditions for peace: Iraqi troops had to withdraw from Iranian soil, Saddam Hussein was declared an aggressor, and Saddam Hussein was put on trial for his arbitrary actions in using his army to invade another country. However, Iraq and other major powers considered Iran to have no right to propose peace conditions.

UN Resolution 598 called for a ceasefire and an end to hostilities between Iran and Iraq. Iran readily agreed in July 1988, while for Iraq the resolution took effect on August 20, 1988. For Khomeini, the end of the war was a bitter reality, as it brought Western and European powers back to the Gulf region—incompatible with the Islamic Revolution. Ultimately, the eight-year war resulted in no victory for Iraq or Iran, but instead cost Iraqi lives and a debt of $80 billion to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

### Iraq-Kuwait War

Poverty resulting from the war with Iran was one of the triggers for Saddam Hussein's takeover of Kuwait. In 1980, Iraq's foreign exchange reserves reached $30 billion, but in 1988, after the war, its foreign debt reached $120 billion, plus a $24 billion government spending requirement. Iraq's

economic prospects were further undermined when global oil prices fell, driven by the world's abundant reserves. Moreover, during the war with Iran, Saddam Hussein liberalized the Iraqi economy, making it difficult for him to manage subsidies, imports, and consumption to support his government. In 1989, Saddam also reduced government staff and the military to reduce spending, rather than increasing unemployment. Ultimately, Saddam Hussein's image in the eyes of the Iraqi people changed from a dignified figure to a leader who was unable to protect his people from poverty, even bringing Iraq to the position of the country with the largest foreign debt.

To address economic problems, Saddam Hussein asked OPEC countries to limit oil production and raise prices. Specifically, Iraq asked Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to cooperate in maintaining high oil prices by reducing production. Iraq requested a loan of $40 billion from Saudi Arabia and to Kuwait 14 billion USD. Kuwait was considered to have paid off and requested a contribution of 10 billion USD from Kuwait for the reconstruction and recovery of the Iraqi economy, but was refused. Kuwait also did not care about the Iraqi problem, in June 1989 Kuwait rejected the oil production quota set by OPEC and felt that after providing support to Iraq in the war with Iran, Kuwait had the right to prioritize and refocus on its own economic revival after the Iraq-Iran war ended (Rogan, 2018, p. 634).

Kuwait's refusal angered Saddam Hussein, who felt betrayed by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, with whom Iraq had fought to protect them – a Sunni nation – from Iran's Shiite movement. Saddam found another loophole to pressure Kuwait into providing economic aid, namely by demanding compensation from oil revenues from Ratga, located on Rumailah, an Iraq-Kuwait border. Saddam accused Kuwait of stealing Iraqi oil through its inclined drilling in Rumailah and seizing the Warba and Bubiyan regions during the Iraq-Iran war. This statement brought back memories of Iraq's recognition that Kuwait was part of its territory, but this recognition was opposed by Britain before

Kuwait was finally liberated by Britain in 1961.

Saddam's demands, which were not listened to at all, led him to deploy Iraqi troops to the Kuwaiti border on July 23, 1990. Here the US and Britain did not see it as a serious effort other than Iraq's desire to influence the course of the OPEC meeting in Geneva on July 27, 1990 by asking for an increase in oil prices. OPEC then set the price of 21 USD from the original price of 18 USD with a quota limit of 22.5 million barrels per day. However, it turned out that the price increase did not satisfy Saddam Hussein, as evidenced by the addition of 20,000 troops to the Kuwaiti border.

The strength of the Iraqi armed forces in 1990 was the fourth largest in the world after China, Russia and the US. Reinforced with 6,000 tanks, 200 helicopters, 10,000 air defense artillery, 16,000 surface-to-air missiles, 900 fighter jets, bombers, 50 airfields, 6 OSA-type warships, 50 Silkworm-type land-based missiles, and 800 Scud-B surface-to-surface missiles, Iraq became a country with a war machine that was quite feared at that time, particularly by Kuwait. To avoid a larger military offensive, Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto and PLO leader Yasser Arafat attempted to mediate between the two sides. However, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher instead demanded that Kuwait not provide any compensation to Iraq.

On July 31, 1990, a meeting was held between the Iraqi Vice President and a Kuwaiti delegation to discuss Iraq's proposed aid request for Kuwait. From the outset, the Kuwaiti Crown Prince, backed by the US and the UK, strongly rejected Iraq's request. Relations escalated further during the August 1, 1990, meeting. Iraq pleaded that the Iraqi people were suffering from starvation, but the Kuwaiti Prime Minister told his delegation, "Why don't they send their wives to the streets to earn money for themselves?" Following the meeting, in the early hours of the morning, Saddam Hussein's military forces invaded Kuwait, not only to seize control of the Rumailah oil field, but to take over all of Kuwait. Within 24 hours, all of Kuwait was occupied by Iraq without resistance, and a

few days later, Iraq declared Kuwait to be Iraq's 19th province.

The UN Security Council immediately passed a resolution demanding Iraq's withdrawal from Kuwait and imposed an economic embargo on Iraq. On August 12, 1990, Saddam agreed to withdraw from Iraq on the condition that Israel withdraw from occupied territories in Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon. In September, the US, UK, and France announced they would hold an Arab-Israeli Peace Conference after Iraq withdrew from Kuwait. Facing international pressure, Saddam employed human shield tactics. He guaranteed free oil supplies to the Soviet Union, released French workers stranded in Iraq, and French President Francois Mitterrand declared that France recognized Iraqi sovereignty over Kuwait. However, the following day, the French Prime Minister supported the US and UK in expelling Iraq from Kuwait.

Seeing that Iraq was still occupying Kuwait, the UN again issued a resolution on November 29 1990 for Iraq to leave Kuwait without conditions no later than January 15 1991 and gave the US a mandate to use military force if Iraq did not comply (Solichien M, 2014, p. 85). Because Iraq failed to comply with Resolution 678 by the deadline, military action against Iraq was inevitable. Under the leadership of General Norman Schwarzkopf and General Collin Powell, Arab forces led by Lieutenant General Khalid bin Sultan attacked Iraqi forces to liberate Kuwait. The attack, carried out on January 17, 1991, became known as Operation Desert Storm. The aim of this attack was to cripple Iraq's defenses from both the air and the ground. After approximately 40 days of coalition forces attacking Iraq, Iraqi forces surrendered and withdrew from Kuwait. With Iraq's surrender, US President George H.W. Bush declared the war over.

### American invasion of Iraq

After the Iraq-Kuwait war ended, America did not immediately leave the Middle East, but continued to try to find a way to overthrow the anti-Western Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. The US launched the war in March 2003 with the primary mission of toppling Saddam Hussein. The war was justified by accusations that Saddam Hussein possessed nuclear bombs and weapons of mass destruction and collaborated with the terrorist group Al Qaeda. America claimed to be liberating the Iraqi people from Saddam Hussein's dictatorship. But until the final withdrawal of US troops, America's accusations were never proven. The nuclear bomb was never found, nor was there any evidence that Saddam had any contact with Al Qaeda, making this war truly illegal under international law.

On March 21, 2003, Iraq was invaded by a US-led coalition (UK, Spain, and Australia) without a mandate from the UN. However, the invasion went ahead because the US and UK had interpreted UN Resolution 1441 with the phrase "face serious consequences" as justification for the invasion of Iraq, which was deemed unwilling to cooperate with the UN weapons inspection team to disarm Iraq of its chemical and biological weapons of mass destruction.

Attacking Iraq on the basis of fighting international terrorism with accusations that Baghdad has ties to Al-Qaeda, an organization that is hated and feared by America, because it blew up the WTC building on September 11, 2001, is also completely baseless, because Al-Qaeda is an organization that adheres to fundamentalism and does not like liberal or secular ideologies, while Saddam Hussein and the Baath party adhere to liberal and secular ideologies that are very contrary to Al-Qaeda, and Saddam Hussein's regime itself is one of the targets that must be destroyed by Al-Qaeda.

As a result of the US military aggression against Iraq, almost all Iraqi facilities and infrastructure were destroyed. Tens of thousands of innocent Iraqis died in vain, and millions lost their families and homes. Centers of Islamic civilization in Iraq were also destroyed by bombings launched by the US and its allies on Iraqi territory. This US attack in 2003 succeeded in toppling the regime of Saddam Hussein and his Baath Party, which had been in power for 30 years.

From the perspective of offensive realism, the United States' invasion of Iraq can be understood as a strategy to strengthen its global hegemony through control of oil resources and the cultivation of political influence in the strategic Middle East region. Conversely, thinkers from the critical school interpret the action as a manifestation of neo-imperialism, in which a great power uses the discourse of democracy and human rights as moral legitimacy for its project of political and economic domination. Liberal approaches that emphasize the importance of multilateral cooperation and adherence to international law appear to be neglected, given that the United States acted unilaterally after failing to obtain full authorization from the UN Security Council [16]. Therefore, US actions in Iraq are more in line with the logic of power as explained by realist theory than with the principles of liberal idealism.

Following the US invasion, Iraq's political transition took place in a highly unstable environment, characterized by security chaos, the collapse of government institutions, and escalating sectarian conflict. Despite successful multiparty elections, the country's democratic practices remained fragile due to rampant corruption, sectarian tensions, and interference from foreign powers. The de-Ba'athification policy introduced by the Coalition Provisional Authority exacerbated the situation by removing experienced, professional military personnel and officers, creating a government vacuum and deepening social divisions [17]. As a result, although Iraq formally succeeded in adopting a democratic system, this success was merely procedural and failed to bring about a stable, inclusive, and peaceful political order.

The United States intervention in Iraq was a complex undertaking, in which hegemonic interests and neo-imperialist practices appeared to outweigh claims of liberation or democracy promotion. In terms of legitimacy, the invasion lacked the full support of the UN Security Council and therefore failed to meet international legal standards, undermining the rules-based global order. The impact on the ground demonstrated that the military intervention destroyed Iraq's social and political structures, fueled chaos, and opened the door to the emergence of extremist groups like ISIS [18]. Evaluations of US foreign policy indicate that unilateral use of military force for weak reasons actually creates long-term instability, rather than bringing about the promised peace and democracy.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The war that Iraq launched against Iran gave the United States the opportunity to invade Iraqi territory by supporting Iraq, particularly politically, diplomatically, and militarily, resulting in Iran's defeat. This was before the United States invaded Iraq in January 1991, following the Second Gulf War. If Middle Eastern countries could strengthen and prioritize cooperation and build strong regionalism, similar to the European Union, then America's opportunity to intervene politically and economically in the Middle East would have been effectively addressed.

When the United States and its allies launched a military intervention in 2003, Saddam's regime was swiftly toppled. However, the fall unleashed a new and more complex chaos. The Coalition Provisional Authority's policy of disbanding the Iraqi military and implementing de-Ba'athification created a massive power vacuum and exacerbated social divisions. This situation fueled bloody sectarian conflict and paved the way for the rise of terror groups like Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which later evolved into ISIS. As a result, the post-Saddam transition period was marked more by violence, corruption, and political instability than by the establishment of a peaceful and sustainable democracy.

America's foreign policy tendency is to support anyone who benefits them, as reflected in its political stance of supporting Iran during the reign of Reza Pahlavi, then becoming hostile under Khomeini, then supporting Iraq in attacking Iran, then from supporting Iraq to attacking Iraq and siding with Kuwait in the Second Gulf War. America's presence in the Middle East has

made security and political stability less than optimal.

These events serve as important lessons for the world about the limits of intervention and the true meaning of state sovereignty. The Iraqi case highlights how unilateral military action without a solid foundation can undermine the international legal order and set a dangerous precedent. Furthermore, the Iraqi experience demonstrates that toppling an authoritarian regime is far easier than building an inclusive and stable political system after an intervention. Iraq's legacy serves as a lasting reminder of the unpredictable and often tragic consequences of foreign interference and highlights the complex relationship between national sovereignty, global responsibility, and the ambition to shape a new world order.

## REFERENCES

[1]     L. Fawcett, *International Relations of the Middle East*, 4th ed. Oxford University Press, 2016.

[2]     S. S. Fasawwa, "Sejarah Peradaban Masyarakat Mesopotamia yang Kini Jadi Irak," tirto.id. [Online]. Available: https://tirto.id/sejarah-peradaban-masyarakat-mesopotamia-yang-kini-jadi-irak-gnTW

[3]     S. D. Maarif, "Teori Realisme dalam Hubungan Internasional dan Contohnya," tirto.id. [Online]. Available: https://tirto.id/teori-realisme-dalam-hubungan-internasional-dan-contohnya-gPv6

[4]     S. E. Subitmele, "Realisme Adalah Teori Menjelaskan Realitas Politik Internasional, Ketahui Dasar dan Sejarahnya," Liputan6. [Online]. Available: https://www.liputan6.com/hot/read/5076032/realisme-adalah-teori-menjelaskan-realitas-politik-internasional-ketahui-dasar-dan-sejarahnya

[5]     B. A. Isnanto, "Hegemoni Adalah Dominasi Kekuasaan, Ini Pengertian, Jenis, dan Contohnya," detikedu. [Online]. Available: https://www.detik.com/edu/detikpedia/d-7018091/hegemoni-adalah-dominasi-kekuasaan-ini-pengertian-jenis-dan-contohnya

[6]     Redaksi, "Relevansi Teori Realisme Ofensif Untuk Indonesia," siagaindonesia.id. [Online]. Available: https://siagaindonesia.id/relevansi-teori-realisme-ofensif-untuk-indonesia/

[7]     M. R. A. Korompot, Darwis, and I. F. Nugraha, "Dilema Australia: Kontestasi Hegemoni antara Amerika Serikat dan China di Kawasan Indo-Pasifik," *Jurnal Ilmu sosial*, vol. 5, no. 11, pp. 1–14, 2024.

[8]     T. Nardin, *The Ethics of Humanitarian Intervention*. Nomos, 2002.

[9]     D. Rodogno, *Against Massacre: Humanitarian Interventions in the Ottoman Empire, 1815–1914.* Princeton University Press, 2012.

[10]    M. Walzer, "Mill ' s ' A Few Words on Non-Intervention ' A Commentary," pp. 347–356, 2018.

[11]    G. Evans, *The Responsibility to Protect: Ending Mass Atrocity Crimes Once and For All*. Brookings Institution Press, 2008.

[12]    L. Tysara, "Apa Itu Imperialisme: Pengertian, Sejarah, dan Dampakny," LIputan6. [Online]. Available: https://www.liputan6.com/feeds/read/5898377/apa-itu-imperialisme-pengertian-sejarah-dan-dampaknya

[13]    M. Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860–1945 Nature as Model and Nature as Threat*. Cambridge University Press, 2009. doi: 10.1017/cbo9780511558481.001.

[14]    E. W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: VINTAGE BOOKS, 2003. doi: 10.3724/SP.J.1010.2008.00129.

[15]    J. L. Holzgrefe, "Humanitarian Intervention: Ethical, Legal and Political Dilemmas," pp. 15–52, 2003, doi: 10.1017/CBO9780511494000.002.

[16]    J. Ikenberry, *America Unrivaled the Future of the Balance Power*. Cornell University Press, 2002.

[17]    A. Hashim, *Insurgency and Counter-insurgency in Iraq*. Cornell University Press, 2006.

[18]    T. Dodge, *Iraq – From War to a New Authoritarianism*. Taylor & Francis Group, 2017.