

Three decades on, Iraq and Kuwait haunted by Saddam's invasion

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AFP | Baghdad

Thirty years have passed since Iraqi tyrant Saddam Hussein invaded neighbouring Kuwait, but despite hints of a diplomatic rapprochement, people in both countries say the wounds have yet to heal.

On August 2, 1990, Saddam sent his military, already exhausted by an eight-year conflict with Iran, into Kuwait to seize what he dubbed "Iraq's 19th province."

The two-day operation turned into a seven-month occupation and, for many Iraqis, opened the door to 30 years of devastation that has yet to end.

From Baghdad to Basra, Kirkuk to Babylon, Iraqis agree that the incursion "marked the beginning of the end."

"Since the invasion of Kuwait, we haven't known peace or security," said Um Sarah, a retired teacher in Baghdad.

"It's only gone from bad to worse, like we were cursed."

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The most painful of these, for many Iraqis, was the embargo imposed by the United Nations just four days after Saddam's invasion.

The Iraqi dinar, until then worth \$3, began a jaw-dropping devaluation, settling at 3,000 dinars to the dollar.

The wages from a month of working odd jobs were barely enough to buy a chicken to feed the family, recalled Jassem Mohammed, who lived through the embargo in the city of Kut, around 200 kilometres (125 miles) southeast of the capital.

To survive, Iraqis had to get crafty: reusing every bit of plastic or metal, reweaving old clothes and bartering instead of buying.

Iraqi troops returning from Kuwait saw their savings vanish.

"For the first time, I saw a sen-



Iraq's currency and its homegrown industries have yet to recover, even three decades on. While Iraq languished, Kuwait prospered: its currency is one of the most valuable in the world and its people are some of the wealthiest

ior officer with the rank of colonel using public transportation to get around," said ex-soldier Sarmad al-Bayati.

"The army lost its prestige."

'They hung her'

A few cunning businessmen linked to Saddam ran sanctions-busting and smuggling operations, prototypes of the



An abandoned Iraqi Soviet-made T-62 tank sits in the Kuwaiti desert as an oil well burns in the background, on April 2, 1991

mass graft still plaguing the Iraqi state today.

"The embargo changed people's ethics and opened the way for corruption," said Mohammed.

It also destroyed Iraq's middle class: with goods barred from entering, Hisham Mohammed saw his father's business of importing construction materials collapse.

"With the embargo, products weren't entering anymore and all of my father's capital -- 100,000 dinars -- was worth nothing," said the 50-year-old Baghdad resident.

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But they are still haunted by Saddam's invasion.

Entire neighbourhoods were destroyed, hundreds of Kuwaitis were tortured or executed, and thousands more were taken as prisoners of war.

Only 17 at the time, Ghida al-Amer is still horrified by the fate of her older sister, a chemist who helped the Kuwaiti "resistance" lay explosives for incoming Iraqi troops.

"They hung her with electrical wires," she recalled.

"The wound is still there."

Forgive, but never forget

Even politically, the war's bitter legacy is taking years to undo.

The UN only lifted the last of

its sanctions on Iraq in 2010, and Baghdad has paid around \$50 billion in the last three decades in reparations.

Today facing its worst fiscal crisis in years amid the coronavirus pandemic and plummeting oil prices, Iraq has asked for an extension for the final \$3.8 billion.

Kuwait has demonstrated some goodwill: in 2018, it hosted a global summit to gather funds to rebuild Iraq, ravaged by the three-year fight against IS.

But it remains bitter over two issues: borders and bodies.

Kuwait's maritime patrols regularly detain Iraqi fishermen who stray too far into neighbouring waters. Iraq says the UN-drawn maritime borders are unfair.

Kuwait is also lambasting Iraq for delays in identifying the remains of Kuwaiti victims buried in Iraq.

The fate of around 1,000 citi-

zens from each country remains unknown, after years of war and chaos.

A programme by the International Committee of the Red Cross to repatriate remains has only brought home the bodies of 215 Kuwaitis and 85 Iraqis.

Shuruq Qabazard, who was a young girl during the invasion, said the last 30 years have helped her empathise with Iraqis.

Her father Ahmad, a leading figure of Kuwait's resistance, was tortured and ultimately killed by Iraqi forces.

"With time, we discovered that Iraqis, like us, suffered the tyranny of Saddam Hussein," she said.

But erasing the scars of the invasion is "impossible", she said.

"It was the most important event for my entire generation," she told AFP.

"We may be able to forgive and reconcile, but we will never be able to forget."



Aircraft carrier USS America traverses the Suez Canal on its way to the Red Sea to take part in the Gulf War, in January 1991



Two Kuwaiti men walk in the al-Ahmadi oil field, where wells were set ablaze by retreating Iraqi troops, in March 1991

Adventurer's 'Into the Wild' bus may be headed to Alaska museum

Reuters | Anchorage, Alaska

The infamous bus that served as the final campsite for doomed adventurer Christopher McCandless could be preserved as a museum piece under a plan announced by Alaska officials.

The University of Alaska Museum in Fairbanks has offered to house the bus, removed by the state last month from its six-decades-long resting site near Denali National Park.

The 1940s-era bus had been an attraction for fans of the 1996 book "Into the Wild" and the 2007 movie of the same name. Over the years, hundreds



Alaska Army National Guard helicopter hovers near 'Bus 142' near Stampede Road

trekked out to spend time at the abandoned bus, where McCandless spent 114 days before dying of starvation in 1992.

Many of those making pilgrimages to the site put themselves at risk, prompting the state to airlift the bus from the trail made famous by the 24-year-old McCandless.

Two hikers drowned during river crossings. Others have been rescued after becoming injured or stranded. In February, five Italian tourists, one with frostbitten feet, were rescued, and in April a stranded Brazilian tourist was helicoptered out.

The museum's offer allows the state to memorialize all those who took shelter in the bus while avoiding the "specter of profiteering" from tragedy, Corri Feige, Alaska's natural resources commissioner, said in a statement.

"I believe that giving Bus 142 a long-term home in Fairbanks at the UA Museum of the North can help preserve and tell the stories of all these people," Feige said. "It can honor all of the lives and dreams, as well as the deaths and sorrows associated with the bus, and do so with respect and dignity."