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THE IRAQI INVASION; In Seeking Iraqi Motive, Some Turn to 1918 Atlas

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Iraq's invasion of Kuwait is the most iron-fisted of a series of actions that it has taken against the emirate since Kuwait became independent in 1961.

The roots of the dispute are buried in a time when tribal rivalries flowed across the desert, but it can be directly traced to the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, when Iraq was a Turkish territory and Kuwait was a British protectorate.

It was then, under the Treaty of Uqayr, that the victorious British halved Kuwait, leaving 7,000 square miles of mostly arid, undulating land at the northwest end of the Persian Gulf to constitute the modern country of Kuwait, and divided the remaining half between the Saudis and the Iraqis.

"You see, the borders were arbitrary to begin with," said Leonard Firestone, a Middle East expert and professor of political science at Hofstra University on Long Island. "They were established by the West after World War I, so it was almost an invitation to conflict."

Wealth of Oil Unsuspected

No one knew that Kuwait sat atop some of the world's richest oilfields.

Kuwaitis trace their history to the late 17th century. "That was when several tribes of the great Unayzah Confederation migrated from central Arabia to the shores of the Persian Gulf during a time of terrible famine," said Hooshang Amirahmadi, director of Middle Eastern Studies at Rutgers University in New Jersey.

In 1756, the autonomous sheikdom of Kuwait was founded when the settlers chose the Sabah family as rulers.

For 400 years, the Ottoman Turks had expanded their domination over much of Eastern Europe and the Middle East. And in 1899, largely to protect routes to India, the British decided to protect Kuwait from the Turks. That concern was put to rest with the Allied victory in 1918 and the subsequent carving up of the region.

"But British interest in the Middle East obviously underwent a tremendous transformation following the discovery of oil," said Dr. Amirahmadi.

Oil Concession in 1934

In 1934, the Sabah family granted the British a concession to establish the Kuwait Oil Company, actually a partnership between the British Petroleum Company and the Gulf Oil Company of the United States.

Kuwait's vast oil reserves were developed after World War II and by 1955, Dr. Firestone said, it was producing more than 50 million gallons a day.

In 1961, the British granted independence to Kuwait. But Iraq, asserting that the protectorate had been an integral part of Basra Province under the Ottoman Empire, refused to recognize the nation and massed troops. When Britain sent troops, Iraq retreated.

Since then, with most of its 1.9 million population in urban areas, Kuwait has transformed itself into a nation of air-conditioned skyscrapers and shopping malls, criss-crossed by expressways and dotted by luxury hotels and villas.

The Kuwaitis, with one of the world's highest per capita incomes, hired thousands of foreigners to do much of the work.

Tolerance and Openness

Unlike many of its neighbors on the Persian Gulf, Kuwait had a history of tolerance and relative political openness. "In the 1960's and 70's," Dr. Firestone said, "they even experimented with a modest form of constitutional monarchy. They established a National Assembly. But in 1976, it was dissolved by the monarchy." Last winter, opposition groups staged demonstrations demanding re-establishment of the legislature.

The border dispute was never settled, and twice, in 1967 and again in 1973, Iraq occupied small areas of northern Kuwait.

During its eight-year war with Iran, Iraq kept silent about the dispute because it needed Kuwait's financial support. "It's my understanding that Kuwait and Saudi Arabia loaned Iraq about \$65 billion, at least half of the money coming from Kuwait," Dr. Amirahmadi said. "The Kuwaitis were hoping that the aid would make Iraq relinquish any claim. Obviously, that wasn't what Saddam Hussein had in mind."

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