

## Operation Desert Storm

Operation Desert Storm was a 42-day military operation carried out by an international coalition led by the USA in response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. It took place on 17 January 1991 – 28 February 1991.

Being one of the largest air operations ever carried out at that time, Desert Storm crippled the Iraqi ground forces forcing them to either surrender to the coalition forces or retreat en masse from Kuwait.

This article will give details about Operation Desert Storm within the context of the UPSC 2021.

### Background of Operation Desert Storm

Before understanding the events of Desert Storm it is important to understand the events that led to the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq leading to the Gulf War of 1991.

Iraq on the other hand was facing economic hardship following a war with Iran years earlier. To fund its sinking economy, Iraq had borrowed millions of dollars worth in loans from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. When Iraq could not pay back these loans, Saddam Hussein requested that the loans be forgiven. It was refused by both the countries.

To further exacerbate matters, Kuwait in 1990 was producing and exporting more oil than the other members of OPEC. By June of 1990 the price/barrel had plunged to 17 US Dollars costing Iraq billions in oil revenue. At the same time Iraq also accused Kuwait of illegally drilling into their territory and stealing some of the oil, a charge denied by the Kuwaiti government. This alleged theft of oil would be one of the primary reasons for Iraq to launch its invasion of Kuwait.

Another casus belli was when Saddam Hussein invoked traditional territorial claims regarding Kuwait, citing that it was a by-product of British imperialism.

With these grievances it was obvious that war was coming to Kuwait. Saddam mobilised his army and launched a surprise attack on 2 August 1990, his army swiftly overran Kuwaiti defences, ending the invasion in merely 12 hours. At the end of the invasion, Saddam declared Kuwait as the 19th province of Iraq.

International response to this invasion was swift. Kuwait and US delegations requested a meeting of the UN Security Council, which passed Resolution 660, condemning the invasion and demanding a withdrawal of Iraqi troops.

Soon a coalition was formed from many NATO countries as well as from Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The coalition troops massed on the Saudi-Iraqi border while the Iraqi forces dug in as a static line. Their objective was to prolong the conflict similar to that of the Vietnam War where public opinion had forced a US withdrawal.

However the Iraqi leadership had severely underestimated the technological capabilities of the coalition which would be a costly mistake. When the deadline to withdraw from Kuwait passed, the time had come to launch Operation Desert Storm.

## Air Phase of Operation Desert Storm

On January 16th 1991, the coalition launched a massive air campaign marking the start of Operation Desert Storm. The air bombardment was directed at tactical targets such as radar stations and strategic targets such as infrastructure and electricity. Overwhelming the inadequate air defense of the Iraqi army, the coalition bombed key targets in and around the capital of Baghdad.

The coalition suffered only 75 aircraft losses in over 100,000 sorties, 44 due to Iraqi action.

Over the next six weeks, Iraq's infrastructure and its military were completely devastated paving the way for a ground invasion.

## Ground Phase of Operation Desert Storm

On February 24th, 1991 the coalition launched the ground phase of Operation Desert Storm. It consisted of a two-pronged assault into Kuwait and southeastern Iraq. Outgunned and outmaneuvered, the Iraqi army buckled and folded under the relentless offensive. In the process a large number of Iraqi forces were taken prisoner.

By 26th February 1991, the coalition forces had destroyed 26 out of the 43 divisions in Kuwait. Knocked off-balance by the speed of the coalition advance, the Iraqi military activated its contingency plan which involved withdrawing from Kuwait and destroying as much as vital infrastructure, such as oil fields, as possible. Over 600 oil wells were torched by the retreating Iraqi forces.

However, before a large number of Iraqi forces could retreat, the coalition managed to cut off a portion of them. On February 25th 1991, highway 80 which led out of Kuwait city was jam-packed with the Iraqi army in full retreat. Soon coalition aircraft consisting of fighter jets, heavy bombers and ships attacked the column, strafing and bombing everything in sight.

About 1000 were killed and an additional 2000 captured. Highway 80 earned the nickname 'Highway of Death' after this attack. At this point only a handful of Iraq's Republican Guard divisions stood between coalition forces and complete victory. Despite their much vaunted fighting ability, they were no match for the fast-moving American armored columns.

It was evident that Iraq was losing the war and decided to sue for peace. On March 3rd, 1991 six weeks after Operation Desert Storm began, the two sides met and formally agreed to a ceasefire.

The total casualty count for Iraq was 20,000 killed, 75,000 wounded and 80,000 captured while the coalition losses only numbered upto 1000 casualties, most of them as a result of friendly fire

## Aftermath of Operation Desert Storm

Intended by coalition leaders to be a “limited” war fought at minimum cost, it would have lingering effects for years to come, both in the Persian Gulf region and around the world.

In the years that followed, U.S. and British aircraft continued to patrol skies and mandate a no-fly zone over Iraq, while Iraqi authorities made every effort to frustrate the carrying out of the peace terms, especially United Nations weapons inspections. This resulted in a brief resumption of hostilities in 1998, after which Iraq steadfastly refused to admit weapons inspectors. In addition, Iraqi forces regularly exchanged fire with U.S. and British aircraft over the no-fly zone.

Amid differences between Security Council member states over how well Iraq had complied with those inspections, the United States and Britain began amassing forces on Iraq’s border. Bush (without further U.N. approval) issued an ultimatum on March 17, 2003, demanding that Saddam Hussein step down from power and leave Iraq within 48 hours, under threat of war. Hussein refused, and the second Persian Gulf War—more generally known as the Iraq War—began three days later.

Saddam Hussein was captured by U.S. forces on December 13, 2003 and executed on December 30, 2006 for committing crimes against humanity. The United States would not formally withdraw from Iraq until December 2011.