



SADDAM HUSSEIN

Synopsis

Born on April 28, 1937, in Tikrit, Iraq, Saddam Hussein was a secularist who rose through the Baath political party to assume a dictatorial presidency. Under his rule, segments of the populace enjoyed the benefits of oil wealth, while those in opposition faced torture and execution. After military conflicts with U.S.-led armed forces, Hussein was captured in 2003. He was later executed.

Early Life

Saddam Hussein was born on April 28, 1937, in Tikrit, Iraq. His father, who was a shepherd, disappeared several months before Saddam was born. A few months later, Saddam's older brother died of cancer. When Saddam was born, his mother, severely depressed by her oldest son's death and the disappearance of her husband, was unable to effectively care for Saddam, and at age 3 he was sent to Baghdad to live with his uncle, Khairallah Talfah. Years later, Saddam would return to Al-Awja to live with his mother, but after suffering abuse at the hand of his stepfather, he fled to Baghdad to again live with Talfah, a devout Sunni Muslim and ardent Arab nationalist whose politics would have a profound influence on the young Saddam.

After attending the nationalistic al-Karh Secondary School in Baghdad, in 1957, at age 20, Saddam joined the Ba'ath Party, whose ultimate ideological aim was the unity of Arab states in the Middle East. On October 7, 1959, Saddam and other members of the Ba'ath Party attempted to assassinate Iraq's then-president, Abd al-Karim Qasim, whose resistance to joining the nascent United Arab Republic and alliance with Iraq's communist party had put him at odds with the Ba'athists. During the assassination attempt, Qasim's chauffeur was killed, and Qasim was shot several times, but survived. Saddam was shot in the leg. Several of the would-be assassins were caught, tried and executed, but Saddam and several others managed to escape to Syria, where Saddam stayed briefly before fleeing to Egypt, where he attended law school.

When Saddam Hussein took over as the fifth President of Iraq, hardly did the world realize that an era of strife, war and communal violence awaited the entire Middle-East. With the power vested in him, he showed Iraq the vision of a future which, if fulfilled, would have been a reality much envied even by the prosperous West. Indeed, within the first few decades of his reign, Iraq was on a road to such glory that it had not seen in ages. It is often stated that the country witnessed its best and worst days under him. The strategies he employed to settle what seemed like an eternal religious unrest in Iraq were beyond praise and he won great appreciation from both his countrymen and around the world. Illiteracy, unemployment and poverty were long forgotten words during his regime and Iraq's evolution was on a fast-track. Saddam also basked in the splendor of the economic, social and industrial expansion of his country until the outbreak of the Iraq-Iran war. The days of glory were short lived and soon, owing to never ending conflicts and battles with the neighboring countries, and later with the West, the country was reduced to a barren land.

Childhood & Early Life

Baghdad is determined to force the Mongols of our age to commit suicide at its gates.

Born into a family of shepherds as Saddam Hussein Abd al-Majid al-Tikriti, this famous dictator was named 'Saddam' by his mother, which, in Arabic, means the 'one who confronts'. He was only six months old when his father abandoned the family, leaving him solely to the care of his mother. To add to the family's misery, his teenage brother died of cancer following which, he was sent to the care of his maternal uncle Khairallah Talfah, where he stayed till he was three.

Soon his mother remarried and the toddler was sent back to stay with her. However, upset with the constant ill-treatment at the hands of his stepfather, Saddam, aged ten, fled to Baghdad to stay with his uncle again.

In Baghdad, he attended the al-Karh Secondary School and later dropped out. Soon he was introduced to the Ba'ath Party which derives its name from Ba'athism, an Arab nationalist ideology advocating creation of single-party states to end the political pluralism prevalent in the Arabian countries. He was deeply influenced by this ideology and became an active member of the party in 1957.

In 1958, Faisal II, the last king of Iraq, was overthrown by an army led by General Abd al-Karim Qasim, a Ba'athist, in what is known as the 14 July Revolution.

Iraq was declared a republic and Qasim became its Prime Minister who, despite being a Ba'athist, opposed the idea of Iraq joining the United Arab Republic. His alliance with the Iraqi Communist Party earned him the resentment of the Ba'ath Party and prompted other party members to act against him.

A plan to assassinate the prime minister was formulated and Saddam was asked to lead the operation. On October 7, 1959, in a bid to slay Qasim, the group started shooting but, due to a serious misjudgment on their part, the prime minister was only wounded. The assassins however assumed that Qasim was dead and fled the spot.

After the failure of the plot, fearing arrest Saddam Hussein fled to Syria where he was offered asylum by Michel Aflaq, one of the co-founders of Ba'athism. Aflaq, impressed by his dedication to Ba'athism, later made him one of the leaders of the Ba'ath party in Iraq.

In 1963, Qasim was ousted by the members of Free Officers of Iraq, an undercover militant organization, with the help of the Ba'athists. Abdul Salam Arif, a member of Free Officers of Iraq, became the president and appointed a number of Ba'ath leaders into his newly formed cabinet. Saddam, along with some other exiled leaders, returned to Iraq with hopes for a better future but to their surprise, Arif sacked all the Ba'athist leaders from his cabinet and ordered for their arrest.

In 1966, while still in prison, Saddam was appointed the Deputy Secretary of the Regional Command of the Ba'ath Party. He escaped from prison in 1967 and resolved to reorganize and revive his party and strengthen its stance in Iraq.

Personal Life

His first wife, Sajida Talfah, was his cousin whom he married in 1958. She was the daughter of his maternal uncle Khairallah Talfah. He fathered five children with her viz., Uday Hussein, Qusay Hussein, Raghad Hussein, Rana Hussein and Hala Hussein.

His second wife was Samira Shahbandar, whom he married in 1986. Before their marriage, Shahbandar was married to an Iraqi Airways executive but stayed with the dictator as his mistress. Later, Saddam forced Shahbandar's husband to divorce her so that they could marry. Nidal al-Hamdani, the general manager of the Solar Energy Research Center in the Council of Scientific Research, was his third wife. It was also rumored that he got married for a fourth time to Wafa el-Mullah al-Howeish in 2002.

Rise to Power

In 1963, when Qasim's government was overthrown in the so-called Ramadan Revolution, Saddam returned to Iraq, but he was arrested the following year as the result of in-fighting in the Ba'ath Party. While in prison, however, he remained involved in politics, and in 1966 was appointed deputy secretary of the Regional Command. Shortly thereafter he managed to escape prison, and in the years that followed, continued to strengthen his political power.

In 1968, Saddam participated in a bloodless but successful Ba'athist coup that resulted in Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr becoming Iraq's president and Saddam his deputy. During al-Bakr's presidency, Saddam proved himself to be an effective and progressive politician, albeit a decidedly ruthless one. He did much to modernize Iraq's infrastructure, industry, and health-care system, and raised social services, education, and farming subsidies to levels unparalleled in other Arab countries in the region. He also nationalized Iraq's oil industry, just before the energy crisis of 1973, which resulted in massive revenues for the nation. During that same time, however, Saddam helped develop Iraq's first chemical weapons program and, to guard against coups, created a powerful security apparatus, which included both Ba'athist paramilitary groups and the People's Army, and which frequently used torture, rape and assassination to achieve its goals.

In 1979, when al-Bakr attempted to unite Iraq and Syria, in a move that would have left Saddam effectively powerless, Saddam forced al-Bakr to resign, and on July 16, 1979, Saddam Hussein became president of Iraq. Less than a week later, he called an assembly of the Ba'ath Party. During the meeting, a list of 68 names was read out loud, and each person on the list was promptly arrested and removed from the room. Of those 68, all were tried and found guilty of treason and 22 were sentenced to death. By early August 1979, hundreds of Saddam's political foes had been executed.

Decades of Conflict

The same year that Saddam ascended to the presidency, Ayatollah Khomeini led a successful Islamic revolution in Iraq's neighbor to the northeast, Iran. Saddam, whose political power rested in part upon the support of Iraq's minority Sunni population, worried that developments in Shi-ite majority Iran could lead to a similar uprising in Iraq. In response, on September 22, 1980, Saddam ordered Iraqi forces to invade the oil-rich region of Khuzestan in Iran. The conflict soon blossomed into an all-out war, but Western nations and much of the Arab world, fearful of the spread of Islamic radicalism and what it would mean to the region and the world, laid their support firmly behind Saddam, despite the fact that his invasion of Iran clearly violated international law. During the conflict, these same fears would cause the international community to essentially ignore Iraq's use of chemical weapons, its genocidal dealing with its Kurdish population and its burgeoning nuclear program. On August 20, 1988, after years of intense conflict that left hundreds of thousands dead on both sides, a ceasefire agreement was finally reached.

In the aftermath of the conflict, seeking a means of revitalizing Iraq's war-ravaged economy and infrastructure, at the end of the 1980s, Saddam turned his attention toward Iraq's wealthy neighbor, Kuwait. Using the justification that it was a historical part of Iraq, on August 2, 1990, Saddam ordered the invasion of Kuwait. A UN Security Council resolution was promptly passed, imposing economic sanctions on Iraq and setting a deadline by which Iraqi forces must leave Kuwait. When the January 15, 1991 deadline was ignored, a UN coalition force headed by the United States confronted Iraqi forces, and a mere six weeks later, had driven them from Kuwait. A ceasefire agreement was signed, the terms of which included Iraq dismantling its germ and chemical weapons programs. The previously imposed economic

sanctions levied against Iraq remained in place. Despite this and the fact that his military had suffered a crushing defeat, Saddam claimed victory in the conflict.

The Gulf War's resulting economic hardships further divided an already fractured Iraqi population. During the 1990s, various Shi-ite and Kurdish uprisings occurred, but the rest of the world, fearing another war, Kurdish independence (in the case of Turkey) or the spread of Islamic fundamentalism did little or nothing to support these rebellions, and they were ultimately crushed by Saddam's increasingly repressive security forces. At the same time, Iraq remained under intense international scrutiny as well. In 1993, when Iraqi forces violated a no-fly zone imposed by the United Nations, the United States launched a damaging missile attack on Baghdad. In 1998, further violations of the no-fly zones and Iraq's alleged continuation of its weapons programs led to further missile strikes on Iraq, which would occur intermittently until February 2001.

Saddam's Fall

Members of the Bush administration had suspected that the Hussein government had a relationship with Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda organization. In his January 2002 State of the Union address, U.S. President George W. Bush named Iraq as part of his so-called "Axis of Evil," along with Iran and North Korea, and claimed that the country was developing weapons of mass destruction and supporting terrorism.

Later that year, UN inspections of suspected weapons sites in Iraq began, but little or no evidence that such programs existed was ultimately found. Despite this, on March 20, 2003, under the pretense that Iraq did in fact have a covert weapons program and that it was planning attacks, a U.S.-led coalition invaded Iraq. Within weeks, the government and military had been toppled, and on April 9, 2003, Baghdad fell. Saddam, however, managed to elude capture.

Capture, Trial and Execution

In the months that followed, an intensive search for Saddam began. While in hiding, Saddam released several audio recordings, in which he denounced Iraq's invaders and called for resistance. Finally, on December 13, 2003, Saddam was found hiding in a small underground bunker near a farmhouse in ad-Dawr, near Tikrit. From there, he was moved to a U.S. base in Baghdad, where he would remain until June 30, 2004, when he was officially handed over to the interim Iraqi government to stand trial for crimes against humanity.

During the subsequent trial, Saddam would prove to be a belligerent defendant, often boisterously challenging the court's authority and making bizarre statements. On November 5, 2006, Saddam was found guilty and sentenced to death. The sentencing was appealed, but was ultimately upheld by a court of appeals. On December 30, 2006, at Camp Justice, an Iraqi base in Baghdad, Saddam was hanged, despite his request to be shot. He was buried in Al-Awja, his birthplace, on December 31, 2006.