

IRAQ: A strategic look

IF US TROOPS MARCH ON BAGHDAD THIS YEAR, they'll be walking into the "cradle of civilization."

Situated between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, this fertile, defensible land contributed thousands of years ago to the rise of writing, law, and agriculture (see Iraq Timeline: Babylon to Baghdad at www.csmonitor.com/iraqtimeline).

The powerful empires, including Ottoman, Babylonian, and British, have long since fallen, and modern Iraq's wealth – it controls roughly 11 percent of the world's oil reserves – is entangled by UN sanctions. The nation has been ravaged by war, ostracized by the West, and battered by its leader, Saddam Hussein.

Though united by Mr. Hussein's fierce governance for the past 23 years, Iraq is beset by simmering problems. In the north, two Kurdish groups administer semi-independent but fragile states. In the south, Shiite Muslims recall their failed 1991 uprising against Hussein with bitterness. If his regime falls, any new state-building efforts will need to address the country's ethnic and religious divisions.

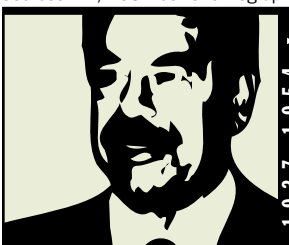
Today, US bases in the Middle East are bristling with troops and supplies. But as America weighs the possibility of invasion, Hussein's fighters are manning defensive positions across Iraq – and possibly readying an arsenal of biological and chemical weapons.

– Mary Wiltenburg and James Norton

Iraq quick facts:

- **Population:** 23,331,985 (July 2001 est.)
- **Capital:** Baghdad pop 4,797,000 (2001 est.)
- **Infant mortality rate:** 58 deaths/1,000 live births (compared to 7/1000 in US; 2002 est.)
- **Life expectancy:** 67 years (2001 est.)
- **Airports:** 110 (2000 est.) (paved runways: 76; unpaved: 34)
- **Telephone lines in use:** 675,000 (1997)
- **Television broadcast stations:** 13 (1997)
- **Televisions:** 1.75 million (1997)
- **Internet service providers:** 1 (2000)

Sources: CIA World Factbook; US Department of Energy; World Almanac, 2002.



65 YEARS OF SADDAM HUSSEIN

CHILDHOOD
Hussein is born on April 28, 1937, in a mud house in a small village near Tikrit. Orphaned at an early age, he is raised on a melon farm by a devout Sunni uncle. In later years, relatives from his town become some of his most powerful advisers and henchmen; they earn the nickname "Tikriti mafia."

SCHOOL / EXILE
In 1955, he enrolls at a nationalist secondary school in Baghdad, and joins the Baath Arab Socialist Party. In 1959, he tries (but fails) to assassinate Iraqi military leader Abdul Karim Kassem, and then flees to Cairo, where he studies law.

PRISON
When a 1963 Baath party coup overthrows Kassem, Hussein returns to Iraq, gets involved in the new government, and marries his first cousin Sajida Khairallah Talfah. That same year, the Baath regime is overthrown. Hussein spends a year in hiding, and then is caught and imprisoned from 1964 to 1965.

RISE TO POWER
When he escapes, he organizes a militia that brings the Baath Party back to power in a bloodless 1968 coup. Hussein becomes vice-chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council, behind his cousin, Gen. Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr. Targeted by multiple coup and assassination attempts, they respond with mass executions that lead Amnesty International to condemn Iraq as one of the world's worst violators of human rights.

OIL AND OIL MONEY
In 1972 Hussein begins to nationalize the country's oil industry, formerly under the control of Western companies. Iraq sits on at least 11 percent of the world's oil – the second-largest reserve in the world, after Saudi Arabia. Hussein uses the new oil revenue to build schools, hospitals, and roads; to fund literacy programs; and to decontaminate water.

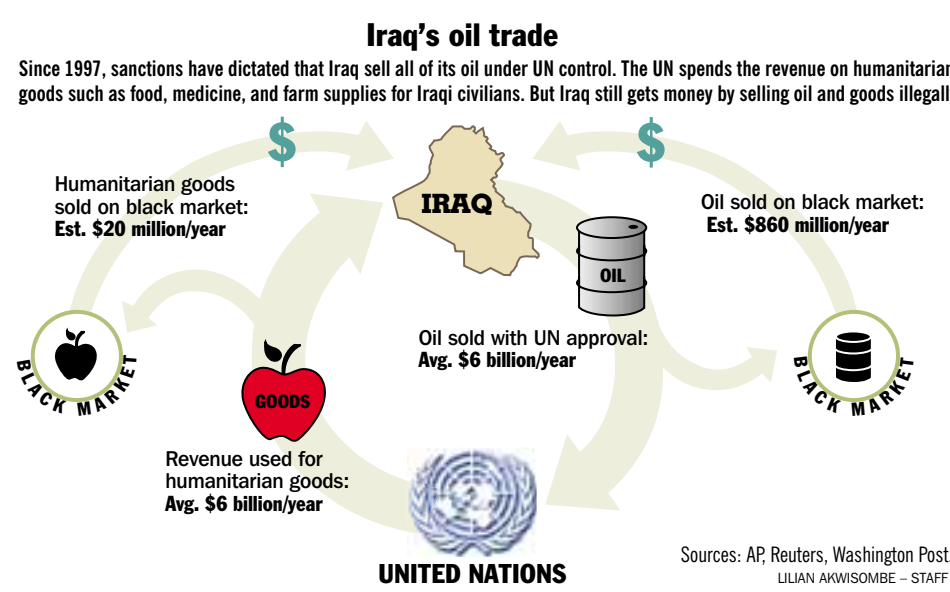
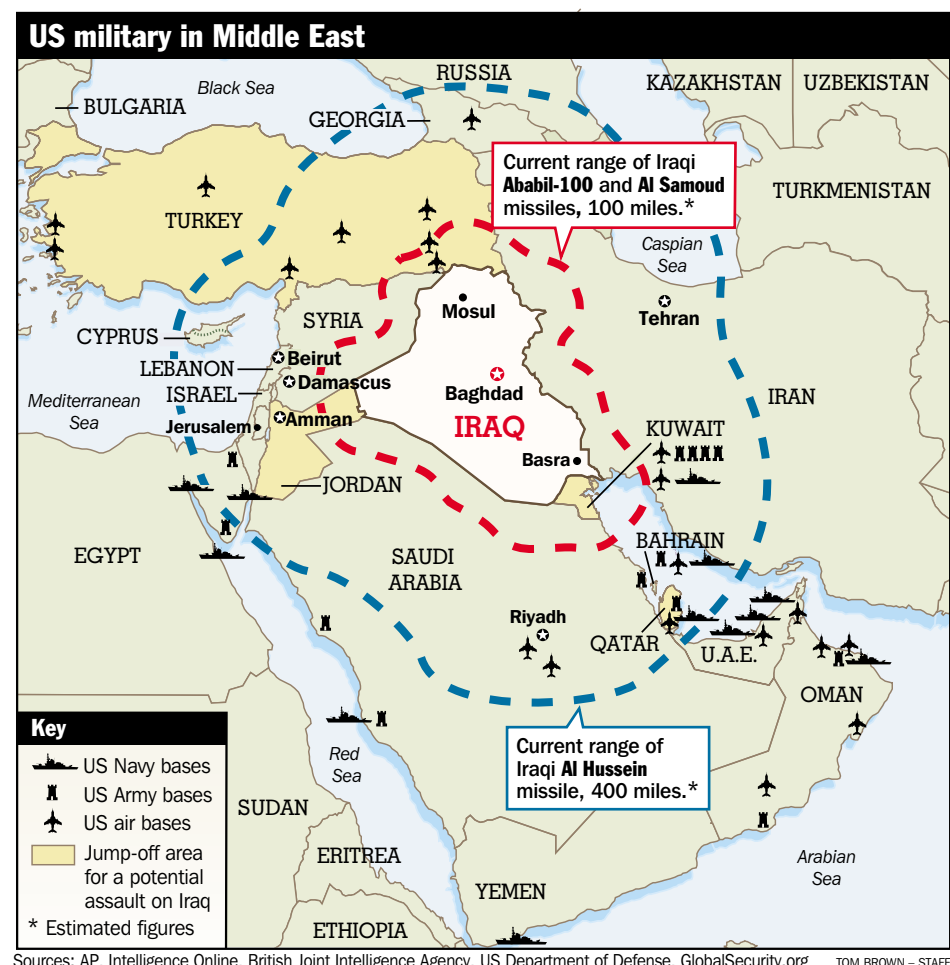
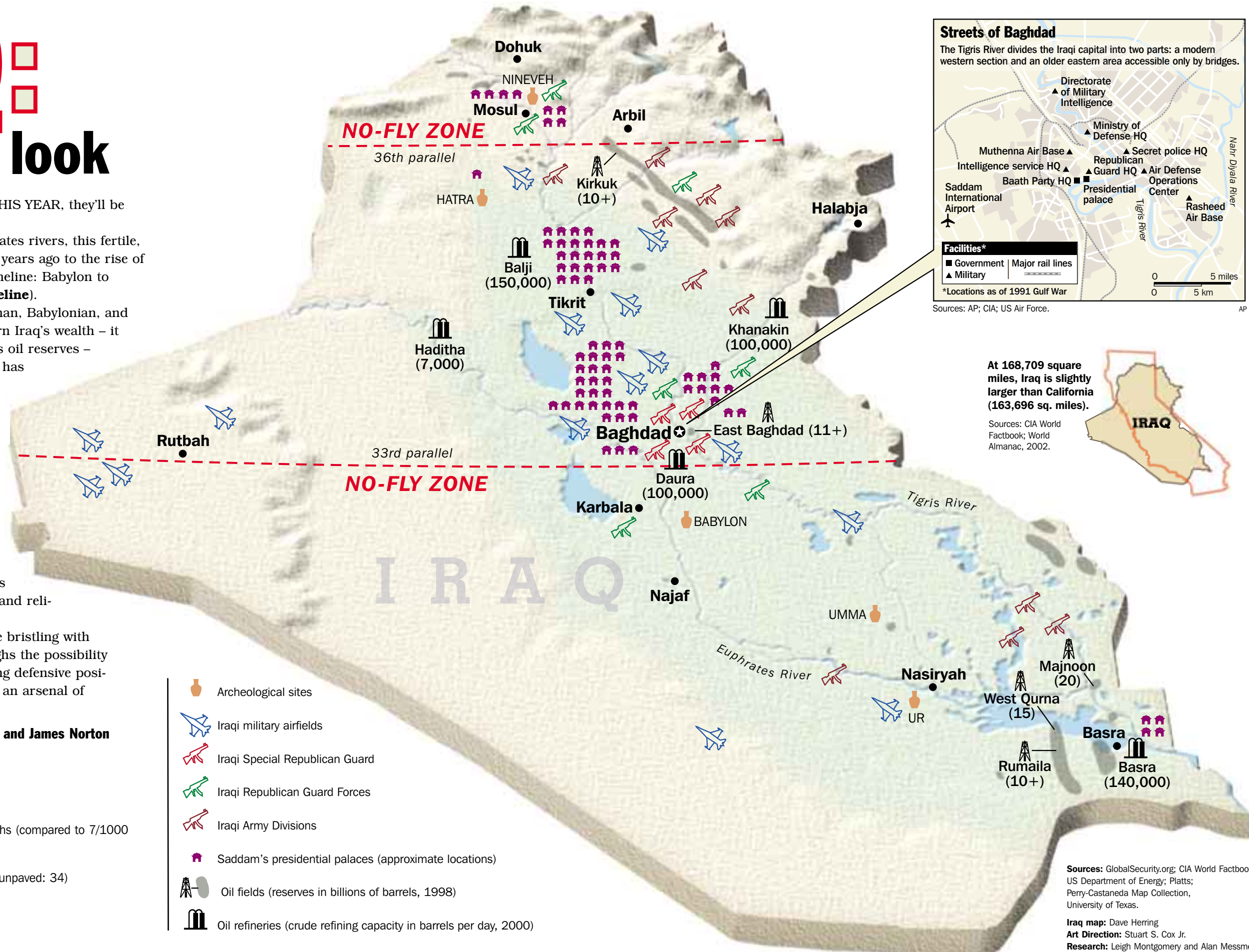
PRESIDENT
In June 1979, Hussein seizes the Iraqi presidency. In August, he orders the execution of about 400 members of his party. Meanwhile, unrest in Iran provokes Iraqi Kurds, who have, over the past two decades, staged numerous rebellions against Hussein and his predecessors. Relations between Iraq and Iran deteriorate.

IRAN / IRAQ WAR
In September 1980, Iraq invades Iran, beginning – with US aid – an inconclusive eight-year war that kills as many as 1.5 million people. Iraq is internationally condemned for its tactical use of chemical weapons, its execution of political opponents, and the murder, by poison gas, of thousands of Kurds.

GULF WAR
Iraqi forces invade Kuwait in August 1990; seven months later they're driven out by a US-led coalition army. Allied bombing causes 100,000 military casualties and destroys most of the country's military infrastructure.

INSPECTIONS / SANCTIONS
The UN requires that Hussein open Iraq to weapons inspectors; strict international sanctions are imposed until he does. Living conditions worsen; as many as 800,000 Iraqi children die. In 1995, Hussein's sons-in-law defect to Jordan with their wives and leak Iraqi weapons secrets; UN inspectors locate and destroy weapons. Hussein lures his two sons-in-law back to Iraq and has them killed.

ANOTHER WAR?
Hussein is now engaged in a difficult diplomatic dance: trying to win the support of other Arab states, and playing historical rivals (and Security Council veto holders) Russia and the US against each other. If the US has its way, the leader's 23-year reign may be nearing its end. But many wonder who – or what – will replace him.



Sources: AP; 1981 Current Biography; Iraqi mission to the United Nations; "Tales of a Tyrant" (by Mark Bowden, The Atlantic Monthly, May 2002); Encyclopedia of the Orient. Photos from left to right: AP, Jassim Mohammed/AP, AP/FILE, Jack Dabaghian/REUTERS, Jamal Saidi/REUTERS.