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US WAR ON IRAQ: 20 YEARS LATER

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IRAQ 2.0

The quagmire of a foreign-imposed state-building experiment

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Six weeks after the launch of the US invasion of Iraq, President George W. Bush was announcing from onboard a US aircraft carrier the end of major combat operations. A large banner was hanging before him with the phrase “Mission Accomplished”. Fast forward twenty years, the Iraqi state is characterised by sectarianised politics, endemic politically-sponsored corruption, a fragmented security sector, and has even plunged into civil conflict twice.

THE INITIAL CONVICTION of the Bush administration was that the Iraqi state would continue functioning even while temporarily decapitated. That was based almost entirely on information and advice coming from groups of expatriate Iraqi elites that lobbied for years before 2003 to convince Washington to topple Saddam. Chief among them was the Iraqi National Congress (INC) and its leader Ahmed Chalabi, an Iraqi Shia exile with close ties to US neo-conservatives. Tellingly, shortly before the conclusion of major operations, Chalabi was flown to Iraq accompanied by roughly 400 followers to assume control of the transition to democracy. However, it soon became apparent that a group of former exiles with limited knowledge of Iraqi realities and political capital had shallow chances of being elected, let alone running the country.[1]

A bad start: Prelude to twenty years of instability

In May 2003, the US formed the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) as a formal occupational administration to address the above-mentioned reality check. Headed by Paul Bremer, the CPA was given full executive, legislative and judicial authority to "help Iraqis get to the path to representative government". Bremer and the CPA's understanding of Iraq were similar to that of their Iraqi allies, with Washington anticipating fast-track results to triumphantly disengage from the country. This was reflected in the issue of their most critical decisions in mid-2003. Firstly, with Orders No. 1 and No. 2, the CPA initiated the state's' De-Baathification' and the armed forces' dissolution, respectively. Secondly, in July 2003, the CPA formed the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), a twenty-five-body tasked with providing consultation to the CPA and setting the foundations of Iraq's future political system.[2] The rationale behind both orders and the formation of the IGC was to ensure Iraqis that the 'Ancien Régime' was gone and the subsequent transitional justice and political transformation would be swiftly served. Conversely, all these opened Pandora's box. With Order No.1, De-Baathification initially led to removing 30.000 to 50.000 state employees. While the order targeted the four higher echelons of party members, it collaterally left thousands unemployed with Baathist affiliation since party membership was imperative for state and agency employment. Its implementation seriously hampered the state's administrative capacity and excluded many Iraqis who were not complicit in Saddam's regime from contributing to state-building.[3] CPA's most controversial Order No.2 came only days later to disband Iraq's armed forces and intelligence entities, thus leaving more than 400.000 people unemployed and without an active Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) process. Notwithstanding the validity of the US' claim that the Iraqi army self-demobilised, the administration offered an insufficient and belated remedial treatment in the form of state pensions. Additionally, the formation of a new military comprised largely of inexperienced personnel was only announced in August 2003 and further alienated one of the population's most lethal parts, which, in turn, became prone to join the already burgeoning insurgency.[4]

Following up Iraq's democratisation, the IGC was established. However, with few exceptions, its members were hardly representative of the whole population. Moreover, they were drawn via sectarian proportionality from a pool of Saddam's exiled opposition figures, thus altering the balance of power in Iraqi politics. In the conscience of the previously oppressed but now dominant Kurdish and Shia populations, Sunnis' overrepresentation in Baath equated them with Saddam's regime. The altered balance of power was

institutionalised under the new consociational political system called 'Muhasasa', which was enshrined in the Permanent Iraqi Constitution of 2005 as well. The distribution of political positions by quotas aimed to promote inclusivity in governance. Specifically, the President's position is reserved for a Kurd, the Prime Minister's for a Shia, and the Speakership of the Parliament for a Sunni. Instead, it facilitated ethno-sectarian elites to compete for control over state institutions and funds and pursue the exclusion of perceived rivals. Subsequently, with Baath gone and with no major political party expressing them, most Sunnis perceived CPA's decrees and Muhasasa's establishment as the institutionalisation of their new inferior status.[5]

Iraq for Iraqis; or at least for some of them

By the time the CPA transferred administrative power to the first Interim Iraqi Government in 2004, Iraqi politics were dangerously polarised. With most Shia parties and politicians backed by the US and Iran, and with the new provision for Shia Prime Minister, power in Baghdad became a Shia business. The Kurds, on their part, moved to consolidate their authority in the north. While wary of the Shia-led centralisation of power in Baghdad, they balanced between pushing for greater autonomy without overtly antagonising the Shias and, by extension, Iran.[6] Both Shias and the Kurds were already familiar with ethno-sectarian identification and mobilisation. Their collective sense of identity-related victimhood after decades of repression by Hussain's regime subserved this familiarisation. So did the return of exiled Shia Islamist parties from Iran and the existence of Kurdish nationalist parties in the north. The case differed for the Sunni Arabs, who largely boycotted the new political process. To be sure, while being a priori at a disadvantage, the non-participation in democratic processes only rendered them more powerless, thus exacerbating the feeling of segregation with dire consequences. Ironically, years after the US' false claim about Al Qaeda's presence in Iraq, these developments were conducive to Al Qaeda's emergence and its brutal campaign against the Shias that ultimately pitted the country into the 2006-2007 civil conflict. Paradoxically, the end of hostilities in 2008 and the defeat of Al Qaeda resulted from an understanding between the US military and a coalition of Sunni tribes, called the Sons of Iraq (SOI). The former funded and armed the latter to fight off al Qaeda in what became known as the 'Sunni Awakening'. Consequently, a large part of the Sunni community was incentivised by tribal and religious leaders to abandon the insurgency and seek political re-engagement.[7]

Despite the decline of violence and sectarian tensions between 2008-2010, the détente did not last. Nouri al-Maliki's two increasingly authoritarian premierships (2006-2014) represent the perfect legacy of the problematic US-initiated state-building. A Shia formerly exiled politician with links to both Iran and the US, al-Maliki sought a twofold power consolidation: by attempting to control the security sector; and, by manipulating the Sunni-Shia divide to dis-

empower his Sunni and Shia political opponents alike. He weakened the SOI financially and derailed its promised integration into the military. That was a substantial blow to the Sunni demographic, particularly when compared to the opposite treatment of Shia Iranian-affiliated militias such as the Badr Brigade. Al-Maliki treated the military as his fiefdom by disproportionately awarding officer positions to Shia loyalists and creating his patronage network through corruption at the expense of the institution's robustness. On the political field, after the 2010 controversial election, al-Maliki's machinations enabled his stay in power against Sunni-supported Ayad Allawi. The ensuing targeting of political opponents and Sunni government members left the Sunni community disillusioned about the prospects of political inclusivity. This triggered the Sunni 2011 protest movement (al-Harak al-Shaabi), which was crushed by the army. Concurrent moves to exert control on institutions such as the Independent High Electoral Commission and the judiciary through De-Baathification purges further deteriorated the situation. The result was the cultivation of fertile ground for the resurgence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014 with the participation of significant numbers of former Baathists. Besides, the fact that the Shias carried out the lion's share of the fight against ISIS was the clearest manifestation of the Sunni rejection of the post-2003 Shia-dominated state.[8]

Al-Maliki's resignation came in 2014 following the fall of Mosul to ISIS and after he had fallen from grace with his international backers. Regardless, the resignation did not mitigate the Sunni aversion to the status quo. In turn, ISIS' ferocity presented the Shia community with an existential threat and deepened sectarian divide. The Iraqi army's collapse in 2014 after years of De-Baathification and septic corruption triggered the proliferation of Shia militias that coalesced into the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). The PMF was essentially the culmination of a rally-around-the-flag effect in defence of the status quo. They incorporated Shia groups with varying allegiances to Iran, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, and Muqtada al-Sadr, as well as other minority self-defence groups composed of Yazidis, Christians, and Sunnis.[9] Yet, despite the heroic victory over ISIS in late 2017 and the eventual regroup of the state's military, they continued to amass power and enjoy high domestic legitimacy, hence achieving their entrenchment as autonomous power centres. Most of them refused to disband and several PMF leaders turned to politics. That complicated the intensifying intra-Shia power struggle mainly between a re-emerging al-Maliki backed by Iran and the powerful cleric Muqtada al Sadr who positioned himself on the nationalist side of the political spectrum. Shielded from accountability and with the Iraqi military incapable of confronting them, certain PMF groups became the heavy hand of their domestic or foreign political sponsors, therefore self-hampering their popular legitimacy.[10]

The most revealing instance was the deployment of mostly Iranian-affiliated PMF elements to brutally suppress the 2019 'Tishreen' protest movement. The predominant Shia participation in Tishreen stripped the elites of the ability to use the sectarian card for defaming the protests and blaming them on tumultuous Sunnis. The movement spearheaded a shift that had begun with similar protests back in 2015, from identity divisions to popular civic grievances, regarding widespread corruption, economic mismanagement, and, most importantly, the rejection of the Muhasasa system. Nevertheless, aside from the resignation of the Mahdi government, the redrafting of a new electoral law, and the rise of protest culture, Tishreen's overall impact was limited. It did not

produce any unified organisational structure with clear messages or leadership, thus giving the elites the chance to recalibrate and endure public discontent. Sadr's siding with the protests' anti-corruption demands since 2015, is telling of established strongmen's capacities to adapt.[11] Furthermore, the intensified political wrestling between Sadr and al-Maliki following the 2021 elections, resulted in a 10-month stalemate that ended up with a parliament Sadrists-free and hardly representative of the popular vote. The 2022-formed incumbent al-Sudani government vowed to address Iraqis' civic grievances. Unsurprisingly, though, change seems again stalled on most fronts. To name a few, the 'fight' against corruption is shadowed by dubious decisions in high-profile cases of public wealth plundering and there is no sign of progress in regulating the accountability of militias that continue to operate in grey areas of the law at best. Most importantly, maintaining elite patronage networks through allocating public posts continues unabated, thus underlying the political system's steadfastness to preserve itself.[12]

All the above considered, by reading between the lines of Bush's 'Mission Accomplished', it is evident that from the beginning, the primary US goal was to get rid of Saddam Hussein. Helping Iraqis towards a structured state-building process was a secondary objective that emerged out of the necessity to hastily camouflage for pre-war planning and was followed through with experimentalist naivety at best. Certainly, the US cannot fully take the blame for successive Iraqi governments' calamitous governance. Yet, it was they who laid the groundwork for a highly dysfunctional political system on the wrecks of the Iraqi state and later stood idle in front of multiple worrying developments. The continuous hedging of the dominant elites by sustaining patrimonialism and feeding the security sector's fragmentation could further sharpen popular grievances and perpetuate instability. If someone looks for similarities with Lebanon, its political system, and the durability of its predatory elites, then one may deduce that the post-2003 Iraqi state-building process held a fate of seismic transformations before elections even began to initiate change.

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AFTER THE US INVASION

IRAQI FOREIGN POLICY

From Doomed to Exceeding Expectations

Zakia Aqra

The US occupation left Iraq too vulnerable and weak to have a sustainable foreign policy. In the two decades that passed since the 2003 US-led invasion, Iraq vacillated between being the theatre for the Sunni-Shia divide and finding its footing in the regional dynamics. Initially Iraq's foreign policy was steered towards the former, mainly under the authoritarian tendencies of Nouri al-Maliki's premiership that infused Iraq with sectarianism. Thereafter, successive Iraqi governments have been attempting – rather successfully – to rectify Iraq's foreign policy and channel it towards a more balanced orientation.

IRAQ'S GEOPOLITICAL LOCATION has rendered it the heart of the Middle East, with significant implications for regional dynamics. With Saddam Hussein at its helm, Baghdad's internal and regional political ambitions, more often than not, resulted in conflict. Under Saddam's reign, Iraq had deteriorated its relations with Iran (Iran-Iraq war 1980-1988), the Arab world (e.g., the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the antagonism with Syria) and certainly the international community, resulting in its total political and economic isolation. Thus, after the US invasion, the main goal of the Iraqi leadership was to recover financially, establish security and mend its diplomatic relations regionally and internationally. Iraq's regional policy is two-pronged: first, the Sunni-Shia divide as it was played out through its relations with Iran and the Arab world and, second, Turkey. Baghdad's foreign policy in the two decades after the 2003 US-led invasion may be divided into two main periods: the al-Maliki era, which was characterised by pronounced sectarianism and the post-al-Maliki era in which successive Iraqi governments attempted to steer the foreign policy towards a more balanced, diverse orientation.

The power distribution within Iraq shifted drastically in the post-Saddam era. According to the constitution, the Shia-majority country was, for the first time, governed by a Shia Prime Minister, who has most of the authority on foreign policy making. The other two major communities – the Kurds and the Sunnis, who held the position of President and parliament speaker respectively – had no actual role to play in foreign policy decision-making.[1] In terms of diplomacy, the new Iraqi government did not face serious challenges in reintegrating the country in the international community and international organisations.

During the years of occupation, under the premiership of Nouri al-Maliki (2006-2014), Iraq hosted a number of meetings between Iran and the West, particularly regarding the nuclear deal. This was attributed to the good relations between the new government and Iran, especially in al-Maliki's first term. Upon the departure of the US troops in the end of 2011, Nouri al-Maliki's second term took a more authoritarian turn. He consolidated sectarian and centralised politics by sidelining the Sunni community and the anti-Iranian Shia, as well as the Kurds, that al-Maliki considered as being privileged due to US favouritism, while steering the country into the Iranian fold. Consequently, these domestic dynamics dictated his foreign policy orientation, which had two lasting consequences; first, the 'split' foreign policy reflecting the rivalry Erbil and Bagdad and, second, the antagonism with Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

As an autonomous political entity, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) did not have the jurisdiction to promote its own independent foreign policy, including economic and trade agreements, as per Article 110 of the Iraqi Constitution of 2005. Instead, it had the right to forge its own foreign relations in convergence with the federal government of Iraq. Baghdad's central government already frowned upon the economic cooperation between Ankara and Erbil from 2007 on. However, during his second term

(2011-2014), al-Maliki's adamant decision to curb Kurdish autonomy prompted KRG to pursue independent economic agreements with Turkey and international companies bypassing Baghdad's authority. In retaliation, Baghdad withheld the federal funds from KRG, further pushing the latter to seek an independent foreign policy.[2]

In turn, this triggered an antagonism between Iraq and Turkey. Turkey became the gateway for KRG's economic foreign policy. In addition, Turkey's support for key Sunni Arab and Turkmen leaders in the Mosul region generated suspicion regarding Erdogan's revisionism in Iraq. Equally threatening was the Saudi support to other Iraqi Sunni tribes in its own effort to limit Iran's influence in Iraq. Al-Maliki's alliance with Iran allowed the latter to influence the Iraqi government, dragging Iraq deeper into the realm of Sunni-Shia rivalry.

The implications of al-Maliki's approach to Iraq's foreign policy were adverse. It paved the way for KRG to establish an independent foreign policy from Iraq's central government, thus, weakening Iraq's foreign policy overall. In fact, thereafter, when referring to Iraqi foreign policy, it is widely acknowledged that it refers to that of Baghdad and does not include Erbil's. It was not only the incoherence though that doomed Iraq's foreign policy. Al-Maliki positioned Iraq in the middle of a regional sectarian confrontation, disregarding its domestic sectarian polarisation, paving the way for the emergence of the 'Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which occupied Iraq's second-largest city, Mosul. Naturally, Nouri al-Maliki resigned in 2014.

The post-al-Maliki Era: the Road to Recovery

For the next decade, the subsequent prime ministers of Iraq have been attempting to compensate for and amend the repercussions of al-Maliki's approach both domestically and diplomatically. Iraq's foreign policy under Haider al-Abadi (2014-2018) was directed towards reclaiming Iraq's sovereignty. In order to fight against ISIS, Baghdad invited both the US troops to assist the Iraqi army – albeit under different status – and Iran to train the newly established militia under the umbrella organisation known as Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU).[3] All the while, KRG was being treated as a separate political entity by the US-led coalition against ISIS. Not only were the Kurds receiving separate funding for hosting refugees and IDPs, but they were also receiving military aid, circumventing Baghdad's central government for the first time. While there was little to do in terms of consolidating a more united front among the various groups within Iraq, al-Abadi sought to restore relations with the Sunni camp, with the exception of Turkey.

Relations with Turkey remained fraught, especially as Baghdad refused to allow Ankara to deploy forces in the battle against ISIS in Mosul, fearing Turkish troops' protracted presence in Iraqi territory. That was not the case with Saudi Arabia. Détente efforts were possible for numerous reasons. Not only was al-Abadi being pressured by the international community to reconcile with the Sunni Iraqis and, by extension, Saudi Arabia, but also many among the Iraqi Shia elite, including prominent Shia religious and political figures such as Ali al-Husayni al-Sistani and Muqtada al-Sadr, sought a more balanced approach towards the Iranian-Saudi rift. In addition, since his tenure as Saudi Minister of Defense, Mohammed bin Salman al-Saud (MBS) has pursued a more reconciliatory attitude towards Iraq. The thaw in Riyadh and Baghdad relations was visible; Saudi Arabia reopened its embassy in Baghdad after twenty-five years at the end of 2015.[4]

Iraq remained committed to sustaining a balanced stance between the Sunni and Shia camps despite its challenges. On the one hand, its strongest militia PMU was mostly under Iranian control. On the other hand, Iraqi Shia witnessed intense division among its community between those who supported Iran and those who desired a more balanced relationship with Tehran. This new Iraqi Shia nationalism expressed primarily by Muqtada al-Sadr, challenged Iraqi foreign policy. However, Baghdad opposed Saudi intervention in Yemen to balance out the rapprochement with Riyadh, but also to make a point regarding foreign interventions. Such foreign policy stance was usually misinterpreted as contradictory rather than balancing; yet, it was such moves that paved the way for Iraq to build a more neutral foreign policy orientation. This non-aligned foreign policy was designed to avoid also further fueling the unwearying anti-corruption protests against the Iraqi government(s), resulting in persistent political instability.

The internal and sectarian divide deepened after ISIS' defeat and remained a burden to the administrations that followed. Similarly to al-Abadi, Adil Abdul-Mahdi (2018-2020) continued cultivating positive relations with Sunni states. Perhaps the first concrete sign of Iraq's intention to break free from the Sunni-Shia regional conflict and commit to a balanced and neutral foreign policy was establishing the tripartite partnership with Egypt and Jordan in 2019, which was based on boosting financial and environmental cooperation.[5] During this time, communication channels between Tehran and Riyadh were established with the help of the future PM Mustafa Al-Kadhimi, who was at the time serving as head of Iraqi intelligence. In essence, he paved the way for high-level meetings between the two in Baghdad. As PM, Mustafa al-Kadhimi (2020-2022), had the trust of both sides to play a mediating role.[6] Furthermore, al-Kadhimi promoted Iraq's energy relations with Cairo and Amman so as to link their power grids in hopes of addressing the basic electricity needs in Iraq.[7] For Iraq, this means reducing dependency on Iran and, by extension, a more balanced policy.

At the same time, in order to validate Iraq's balanced and neutral foreign policy, Baghdad has actively participated and contributed to multilateral, regional initiatives that foster a conciliatory and cooperative climate. Indicative of this is the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership, which hosted the Gulf countries, including Iran, as well as Egypt, Jordan, and representatives from the Arab League, EU and UN.[8] The first round took place in Iraq under al-Kadhimi in 2021, and the second round in Amman under the current Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia Al-Sudani in 2022, who seems keen to continue on al-Kadhimi's footsteps.

Ironically, Iraq's new foreign policy orientation has successfully found its 'peace' and footing in promoting regional stability. Both the new regional dynamics of the gradual subsiding intensity of Sunni-Shia rivalry and the Iraqi prime ministers that learned from al-Maliki's mistakes facilitated Iraq's new orientation. The process of trial and error was inevitable given the extent of the US destruction of the Iraqi state mechanism, economy and infrastructure during the occupation from which Iraq is still convalescing. Even though Iraq is still plagued with corruption and internal divisions, it has managed – at least thus far – to uphold a balanced foreign policy on bilateral and multilateral levels exceeding expectations.

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THE FULCRUM FOR THE RISE OF A MULTIPOLAR INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

Stavros Drakoularakos

The Iraq war of 2003 occurred at a period of time when the United States were at the height of its power and clout in the international system. The fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War in 1990-1991 heralded the birth of a unipolar international order based on the strengths and values of the American hegemon. Nonetheless, world history is punctuated with instances of international power equilibria rising, shifting, and restructuring anew. It certainly seems that Washington's Iraqi intervention will be considered as the force motrice, which eventually gave way to power reshuffling in the international order and the end of the unipolar system.

AS ONE OF THE MAIN ARCHITECTS of the Bretton Woods system of the 1940s, the "New World Order" of the 1990s and the early 2000s would take a page from US domestic and foreign policy priorities, which would go essentially unchallenged. To that effect, the 1990s were characterised by a number of instances of the United States generally following the tenets of International Law, acting as the great arbitrator of bilateral and intrastate issues, and assuming the position of policing the international system. The latter's case was confirmed via the mostly US unchallenged leadership over the Iraqi annexation of Kuwait, the Yugoslavian civil war and the Kosovo independence issue. Whereas the Iraq war of 1991 was widely regarded as the most prominent instance of this new status quo for the United States – due to Washington and its NATO allies acting according to the decisions and recommendations of the United Nations Security Council – the 2003 Iraq war, coupled with the unsanctioned US intervention and occupation, were viewed as Washington blatantly disregarding International Law and unashamedly overstepping its international or hegemon responsibilities in favour of its perceived prerogatives. The US intervention and subsequent overhauling of the Iraqi political system were fuelled by serving priorities related to geopolitics, the US military-industrial complex, and, most importantly, energy interests with regard to the Middle Eastern region and the Gulf.[1]

The US intervention had a fourfold aftereffect: first, it acted as a concrete reminder of the challenges related to forced state-building; second, it shed light on the limits of the American military, political and economic driving power; third, it redefined the United States as a country no longer striving to act within the limits of international law, opting instead to maximise its interests, times over; and, fourth, it eventually echoed an international order application of Isaac Newton's Third Law of Motion, wherein for every action in nature there is an equal and opposite reaction.

A world hegemon is defined by a number of criteria: being a service provider; being a security and stability provider, as well as being recognised as such by other states under its purview. Although the early 2000s saw the gradual rise of the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), as potential candidates for the institutionalisation of a new international multipolar system akin perhaps to the Concert Européen of the nineteenth century, the financial crisis of the late 2000s hampered such aspirations, with Russia and China eventually left to pick up the pieces. While bandwagoning behind Washington or following up on its foreign policy cues was the only realistic gameplan for the majority of countries of the international order; for China, Russia and eventually the Gulf states, finding or pushing for fresh ways to balance US hegemony would be the new name of the game for the coming two decades. The US-sponsored failed Iraqi state-building process led to further tensions between both the Shia and Sunni communities, as well as the Kurdish and Christian

ones, reshuffling the deck with regard to the extent of Iranian and Saudi influence in the country, and creating a power vacuum which jihadist groups – such as al-Qaeda in Iraq, and later on the Islamic State – gladly exploited to further their goals. At the same time, the developments of the Arab uprisings after 2010 and the rise of Political Islam, the Syrian civil war, the expansion of the activities of the Islamic State, both within the Middle Eastern region and the West, coupled with Washington's sudden and swift withdrawal from Afghanistan, gave way to the makings of an explosive situation, with regional actors being left to their own devices, and lacking clear and committed US leadership. As nature abhors a vacuum, competing regional actors would slowly rise to the challenge.[2]

An international order requires the majority of its members to be satisfied and/or consenting to its perpetuation. If this condition is not met, then its viability stands at stake. With Iraq at the epicentre of US interventionism and power projection, it seemed that the country, rife with the rivalry between the two main branches of Islam, as well as Kurdish state-building, would be the ideal place for the basis of the new international order to restructure anew. But first, the need would present itself to pinpoint the aspiring great powers, forming the future multipolar world order. And since international law seemed no longer considered as the preferred means for resolving bilateral or multilateral issues, then great power antagonism would be back in play, as evidenced by Russian belligerent policies in Ukraine, or Chinese and Turkish military power projection over Taiwan and the Eastern Mediterranean, respectively. Nonetheless, with the American military foothold eventually coming to an end in the Middle Eastern region and Iraq, specifically, tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia took a turn for the worse in 2019. Tellingly, Iraq shares borders both with Riyadh and Tehran and hosts millions of Sunni and Shia Islam followers, while Iran and Saudi Arabia had severed diplomatic relations ever since 2016. Notwithstanding the ongoing – since 2014 – civil war in Yemen, with the Houthi insurgents rumoured to be backed by Tehran, and located at the soft underbelly of Saudi Arabia, on the one hand, Iraqi territory is viewed as the acting base for Iranian-sponsored militias, which regularly attack Saudi targets, while, on the other hand, Riyadh is accused of supporting the activities of separatist paramilitary groups in the Iranian provinces of Khuzestan, Sistan and Baluchistan.[3]

During 2019, the Iraqi government attempted to jumpstart talks between Tehran and Riyadh, acting as a mediating party, and initially passing on messages through its intelligence service. The following year, indirect communication evolved into talks between the two adversaries, taking place on five different occasions on neutral ground in the Baghdad airport, and lasting until 2022. The rapprochement between both states rested on an agreed-upon road map for reopening their respective embassies in Riyadh and Tehran, as well as on abstaining from escalating and on diffusing issues. However, the Iraqi neutral ground eventually took a turn for the worse due to domestic security concerns, postponing future Baghdad-held talks. Perhaps taking a page from Otto von Bismarck's honest broker playbook, China took the reins of the exploratory meetings in Iraq with regard to Iranian-Saudi normalisation and ushered the negotiations to near completion with the Beijing agreement earlier this year, at the twenty-year anniversary of the US intervention in Iraq.[4]

In other words, where US foreign policy revealed its limitations and failed at state-building and promoting stability and democracy in Iraq and its wider region, Iran, Saudi Arabia and China may have set their own foundations for successful de-escalation and nor-

malisation, and, at the same time, power projecting as alternative hubs. To add insult to injury with regard to US hegemony, in 2023, Saudi Arabia officially joined – as a dialogue partner – the Beijing-led Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, which also includes India, Pakistan, Russia and Iran as members. It remains to be seen whether the unipolar US-led order still has some gas in the tank or if the mid-to-late 2020s will mark history as the times when the world order restructured anew.[5]

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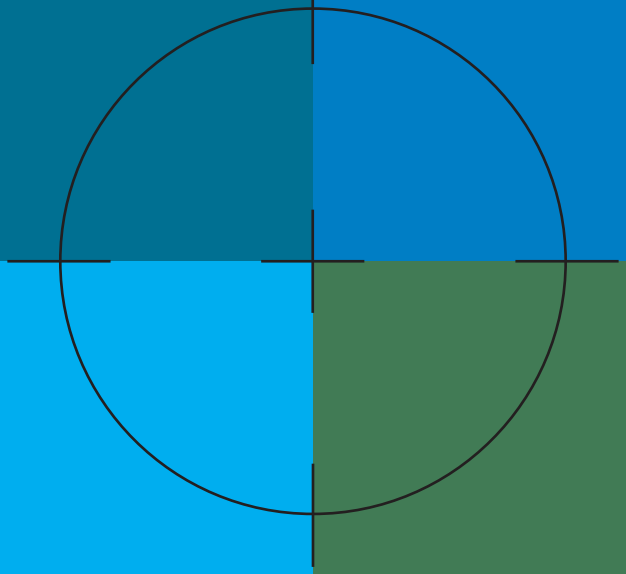
HOW PRIVATE INTERESTS SHAPED THE WAR IN IRAQ

THE ROLE OF PRIVATE MILITARY COMPANIES



Eirini Giannopoulou

The Iraqi conflict is a distinct example of the rise of the private sector's role in conflict resolution after the turning of the millennium. The US based a significant part of its policies in Iraq on the outsourcing of private contractors to fulfil their strategy on the field. This had various implications for the Iraqi state and society, US foreign policy and the neoliberal methods of intervention in the conflict by the West as a whole.

THE END OF THE COLD WAR signalled the rise of neoliberalism in global politics, which, in its turn, allowed the gradual privatisation of traditional state functions. More and more actors were granted access to national politics, shaping initiatives and spreading narratives in their favour. This development was highly prominent in the security and defence sector, where Private Military Companies (PMC) started playing a definitive role in international conflict, especially during and after the 1990s.[1] In essence, PMCs are defined as "*companies that are hired by governments, non-state actors, companies or international organisations, in order to provide functions traditionally associated with the armed forces of a state (...) including the potential use of lethal force*".[2] It is an intricately organised arena that goes hand-in-hand with the growing moral apprehensiveness of the West to claim responsibility for interfering in conflicts, mostly in the Global South. The phenomenon intensified during the 1990s, especially during the conflicts in Angola and Sierra Leone, where it was believed that the private military sector could substitute Western national militaries, under the United Nations' "Responsibility to Protect" mandate. This gradually led to an increased involvement of the private sector in peripheral wars, largely legitimised by the "War on Terror" narrative and conducted through a market-oriented process during the turning of the millennium.

On that note, the case of Iraq is considered a milestone for the rising prominence of PMCs in global politics and international conflict. Specifically, US military activities in Iraq were backed, if not overshadowed, by PMCs, that signed federal no-bid contracts primarily with the US Department of Defense and the State Department. It is estimated that within five years since the American invasion of Iraq, private contractors were approximately 180,000, compared to national troops, which were 160,000.[3] It is argued that PMCs took on tasks that the US army would prefer not to carry out, either due to cost-effectiveness or moral reasons. In essence, this outsourcing was not only an attempt to fill a gap in arms and strategy, but also a means for the Bush administration to avoid unwanted backlash for decisions and events in Iraq, which could have led to its delegitimisation among the public and its international partners.[4]

The duties of the private actors in question varied; intelligence collection, logistic and technical support, guarding of facilities, training, consulting and in-the-field combat are some of the most common sectors of interference. These duties were divided between contractors, mostly based in the US and the UK. One of the most active was US-based Blackwater (now renamed as Academi/Constellis), closely linked to the Republican Party and the network of elites that shaped the counter-terrorist narrative dominating US policy in the Middle East. Cofer Black, former CIA officer and significant figure of US foreign policy initiatives after 9/11, had briefly served as the company's Vice-President. Blackwater was responsible for protecting US officials, such as Paul Bremer, US Administrator for Iraq, and guarding facilities of importance.[5] Moreover, Halliburton (previously known as Kellogg Brown and Root), where Dick Cheney had served as the CEO, provided logistics to the US military troops stationed in Iraq, and benefited approximately 40 billion dollars in federal contracts. Moreover, US PMC, MPRI, famous for its activities during the Bosnian War and in Equatorial Guinea, carried out training for the US army, with an annual profit that would exceed 100 million dollars. Other entities, such as Custer Battles and Triple Canopy Group, had direct contracts with the Coalition Provisional Authority to protect persons and facilities, which cost millions per year. Another PMC, also famous for its activity in the Balkan wars, DynCorp, carried out training for the Iraqi police forces and was accused of defrauding billions of dollars at the expense of American taxpayers. British PMC, Aegis Defense Forces,

was also very prominent in Iraq, while it also employed a small group of underage soldiers from its previous endeavours in Sierra Leone, paying them around 10 dollars per day, as admitted by its head, Nicholas Soames, MP of the Conservative Party.

PMCs in Iraq were accused of misconduct and human rights violations repeatedly throughout the years. One of the most known and severe cases was that of Abu Ghraib prison, where interrogators and translators were private contractors. Leaked footage from within the prison revealed the torture and abuse against prisoners, which included manslaughter and sexual harassment – shocking images of war crimes, the publishing of which was not a common phenomenon for the West at the time.[6] The lack of legal accountability of the perpetrators, has left the victims without justice for the maltreatment they endured and has perpetuated the abuse of human rights within Iraqi prisons up to this day.

Another infamous crime against the Iraqi people by the US and their private partners was the Nisour Square Massacre in 2007, where members of Blackwater opened fire in central Baghdad – an unprecedented attack that led to the killing of 17 and injuring 20 Iraqi civilians.[7] Four American private contractors were convicted for the attack, which was not recognised as a misfortunate event in battle but as a criminal act by the Federal Court that handled the case. It should be noted that the US denied the examination of this case by Iraqi courts, even though these were crimes that happened in Iraqi territory against Iraqi people. To make matters worse, the US legislative system had no mechanism for the attribution of responsibilities for illicit acts by private contractors in Iraq. The perpetrators claimed self-defence, while it is important to note that they were pardoned by Donald Trump, during his presidency. Blackwater's criminal act against innocent Iraqis led to its demise and delegitimisation amongst public opinion.

As mentioned above, the perpetuation of this vicious circle of violence against civilians by private contractors was permitted due to a lack of a concrete mechanism for attributing accountability for illicit acts. Specifically, until the 2009 Withdrawal Agreement, PMCs did not fall under the jurisdiction of Iraqi law, as per agreed in the contracts between the companies and the Coalition Provisional Authority.[8] This allowed for the continuous violation of human rights and the idea that PMCs could act along the grey area between "civilians and combatants", which prevented their definition as "mercenaries" – hence, criminals, as drafted in the Geneva Convention. Meanwhile, in the US, especially prior to the spread of the Abu Ghraib footage, there was little knowledge of the brutal acts of PMCs in Iraq, while transparency about their revenue and contracts remained scarce.

Despite the direct consequences PMCs' presence in Iraq had for the local population, such as the aforementioned killings, abuse and discrimination, this US-led strategy as a whole had long-term consequences for the Iraqi state as well. One of the most evident ones was that PMCs played a significant part in breaching the state monopoly of violence. Especially during the first five years of the occupation, private contractors substituted the national forces, while they were given the freedom to train and consult the security and military personnel according to their standards and anticipated prof-

iteering. For example, a company named KBR designed a security system, that was solely based on arming private subcontractors, not related to Iraq's Ministry of Interior. Through this practice, it was able to maintain a close relationship with the Iraqi state, especially when it comes to the oil exploitation sector. They ignored the particularities and the specific needs of the country, while they did not prioritise the planning of long-term structures and institutions that would allow post-war Iraq to stand on its own feet and provide security and reconciliation on its own terms. The reason behind this is the business-like nature of these actors and their employment, which by default generates the dependence of the Iraqi state on the private sector, allowing for the latter's maximisation of profit.[9]

PMCs' presence in Iraq did become sparser after the US withdrawal in 2011, while still being costly and consistent. In 2020, around 30.000 private contractors were still operating in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria, in close cooperation with the Department of Defense. In 2016, one out of four US personnel stationed in Iraq, were private employees, while 300 private contractors lost their lives in Iraq between 2006 and 2016. These numbers indicate that PMCs remained in Iraq despite the official end of the war in 2011, increasing the sense of occupation and control of Iraq by external forces.[10]

This consolidation of outsourcing further disconnected the public and the international actors from US foreign policy in Iraq, leaving many important factors for its stabilisation in the hand of private capital. The stationing of PMCs in Iraq for two decades has permitted the expansion of their business in neighbouring conflicts, such as Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen, greatly partaking in the destabilisation of the broader area.[11] It also shaped a fertile ground for the activities of PMCs of other state actors, such as Russian Wagner's ventures in Syria and Northern Africa, creating a pattern of conflict intervention by non-traditional non-state actors.

Furthermore, PMCs enforced US hegemony in the Middle East by adhering to the neo-orientalist narrative that was connected to its foreign policy and, consequently, the invasion of Iraq. The reasons were more corporate, rather than ideological, as in global politics, ideas, institutions and private interests intertwine, shaping the dominant power structure. PMCs supported the idea that Iraqis were irrational barbarians that threatened the stability of the West and that the "enemy" or "the axis of evil" had to be terminated from its roots, rendering the invasion and the long-lasting presence of troops in Iraq necessary. They were a significant enforcer for the proliferation of an already legitimised use of violence in the Middle East, while the demonisation of Islam or "the uncivilised Other" remains to this day. Iraqis were openly characterised as "*barbarians that crawled out of the sewer* (...) *that American troops have been sent to liberate*", by Erik Prince, Blackwater's founder.[12]

To conclude, PMCs' endeavours in Iraq have primarily showcased the role of private interests in conflict during the past twenty years. Moreover, they allow observers to grasp the complexity of their involvement in Iraq and how the latter's dependency on private capital is a deep-rooted issue that is yet to be resolved. The levels of vulnerability and government illegitimacy in Iraq remain significantly high two decades after its invasion. One would argue that this growing insecurity, in addition to the collective memory of the atrocities committed by Western, private and non-privateactors in Iraq throughout the past years, has fueled a large wave of radical anti-Americanism and Islamist militancy amongst the Iraqi youth.

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Iraqi Kurdistan two decades after the US-led invasion of Iraq

Beset by democratic deficit and lack of unity

Katia Zagoritou

Twenty years after the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and Saddam Hussein's fall, the initial optimism and expectations among the Kurds, derived from the establishment of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), have been gradually receding, giving place to pessimism and uncertainty. Dismay of Kurdish people became more intense, notably following the 2017 failed independence referendum and its subsequent territorial losses and deteriorating relations with Baghdad, while economic and political grievances have led to protests and migration. Iraqi Kurdistan's enduring internal deficiencies, related to division, democratic deficit, nepotism and corruption, appear today to seriously challenge the entity's future and stabilisation.

THE US-LED INVASION OF IRAQ IN 2003 has been differently perceived and remembered by Arab and Kurdish Iraqis. For the former, the unjustified US-led invasion and the US prolonged occupation have brought nothing but havoc, more corruption, poverty and certainly no democracy as promised. The Kurds, however, after decades of struggle for self-determination and of suffering from the Ba'ath regime's harsh policies of assimilation and persecution - which climaxed with the genocidal Anfal campaign in 1988- as well as from the hardship under a 13-year 'double embargo',[1] saw in the invasion an unprecedented opportunity for further consolidating and expanding the autonomy they had acquired in the early 1990s. Indeed, de facto autonomy had been established in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1991, following Saddam's invasion in Kuwait and the US-led northern non-fly zone's implementation, while the first regional elections were held in May 1992. The Kurdistan Region's institutionalisation came though after the 2003 invasion with its official recognition in the Iraqi Constitution of 2005 as a federal region within Iraq (Article 117).[2]

One might detect three periods in the history of the post-Saddam Kurdistan Region: one from 2004 (Iraqi Transitional Administrative Law) until 2014, a second from 2014 until 2017 and one from 2017 until today. The first period was marked by extraordinary economic prosperity in the model of the Gulf's petro-monarchies, investment and migration –from within Iraq as well as the Kurdish diaspora abroad – due, inter alia, to the security, the quality of services and the relatively liberal environment. Economically, Iraqi Kurdistan has been additionally able to benefit from the deepening of its relations with Turkey, translating into numerous trade, energy and investment deals, owing to Ankara's foreign policy's shift under the AKP from securitisation to political and economic engagement in the Middle East since 2008.[3] However, the building of these relations, specifically between Turkey and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) did not come without price; Turkey has managed to penetrate Iraqi Kurdistan in both political and military terms deepening simultaneously the intra-Kurdish divisions.

Politically, it was amidst this period, in 2009, that the two traditional parties, the KDP and the Patriotic Union Party (PUK), began experiencing a gradual decline in popular support with the emergence of a new party, Gorran (Movement for Change). Gorran, which emerged from the PUK, has advocated administrative reforms and opposed nepotism and corruption.[4] The political party system in the Kurdistan Region officially is a multi-party system with several parties participating in elections; yet, in practice, it has been more of a two-party system with the KDP and the PUK controlling the government since 1992. Yet, by the July 2009 Kurdish elections, the political map appeared to reshape: Gorran seriously challenged the KDP-PUK duopoly winning 25 of the 111-seat parliament, while Islamist and leftist parties won around 20 percent. In the 2013 elections, Gorran, with 24 seats, pushed PUK into the third position. The Kurdistan Region has been indeed experiencing a tendency towards the increase of multiple parties beyond the KDP-PUK duopoly: in 2018 there were around 34 active political parties in Iraqi Kurdistan, the majority of which, however, do not hold any seat in the Kurdish Parliament. Still, it remains a fact that between 2005 and 2014, Kurdistan Region's governance was based on a strategic agreement between KDP and PUK.[5]

The second period, from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) advent in 2014 until the 2017 independence referendum was crucial since, as Palani and al. notice, "Kurdistan emerged as an independent actor with the desire of full-fledged statehood."

Indeed, this period witnessed Kurdish agency and demonstrated that Kurdistan Region has its own agenda, in spite of its internal divergences. When an opportunity arises and is conceived as such by a significant part of Kurdistan's political actors, it seeks to establish its own goals. At the same time, this period, especially prior and during the referendum, highlighted the deep-rooted and enduring intra-Kurdish disunity, which remains a serious impediment to Iraqi Kurdistan's future.[6]

Notwithstanding the numerous challenges that arose from ISIS threat, Iraqi Kurdistan has managed to profit militarily and politically from its close cooperation with the Global Coalition against Daesh (GCD) and its unprecedentedly strengthened position, within the context of the war against ISIS. That translated into increased military capacity, international visibility and engagement, territorial expansion, and subsequent economic gains. It was, therefore, during this period that the drivers informing the decision and timing of the independence referendum evolved and shaped this move; besides, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) President Masoud Barzani has begun calling for a referendum since 2014. The independence referendum was finally held in September 2017; the result was 92.73 percent in favour of Kurdish independence, while the turnout was 72 percent. However, prior to and during the referendum, internal disunity alongside divergences over the referendum's timing and the visions of statehood came to the fore. Indeed, on the eve of the referendum, two blocs emerged: one block made up of the KDP, factions of the PUK (led by Kosrat Rasul Ali, Head of the PUK's Supreme Political Council), the Islamic Union of Kurdistan (known as Yekgirtu), and other small parties in favour of the independence goal. A second one, composed by Gorran, factions of the PUK (such as Bafel Talabani, late Jalal Talabani's eldest son), Kurdistan Islamic Group – renamed into Kurdistan Justice Group since 2021- and New Generation Movement, led by Shaswar Abdulawahid, advocated for the priority of democracy over statehood considering that conditions were not ripe at that time for an independence referendum. The second camp framed the independence referendum as a KDP project using the Kurdish desire for independence to secure its power and weaken its political rivals. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that despite their criticism and objections, all parties finally voted yes.[7]

That brings us to the third period, the post-referendum era, with all its crises highlighting the major internal deficiencies of Iraqi Kurdistan, notably the lack of unified force and the democratic deficit. The aftermath of the independence referendum has been particularly bitter for the KRG with the loss of its previous territorial and economic gains, the shift in the military balance in favour of Baghdad, the banning of international flights to Erbil and Sulaimaniyah airports, as well as the loss of international sympathy and political backing, and a grave deterioration in the Erbil-Baghdad relations, which entered a new phase.[8] In conjunction with these issues, the democratic deficit has increased and evolved into a serious problem in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Regarding the lack of unified force, in both political and military terms, despite efforts, true unification has not yet been achieved. Indeed, two important agreements, the 1998 Wash-

ington Agreement and, notably, the 2006 Unification Agreement, were signed in order to unify the two separate administrations of the KDP and the PUK with their distinct institutions, which have existed since 1998. More recently, in 2017, an agreement was signed, aiming at modernising and unifying into a single unitary military force the previously separate Peshmerga forces. Nevertheless, in practice, the two ruling parties continue to maintain their own separate military, security, and intelligence forces, as well as their zones of influence; Erbil and Dohuk under the KDP and Sulaimaniyah under the PUK control.[9]

Regarding the democratic deficit, delays of elections and extensions of presidential terms have become the rule in Kurdistan Region, therefore, undermining democracy. As an independent Kurdish outlet stresses, "no regional elections have been held on time since the first legislative elections in the Kurdistan Region on May 19, 1992." Indicatively, Masoud Barzani refused to give up his post as KRG's President at the end of his term in 2013 and stayed until 2017 by means of two successive extensions, a two-year extension until 2015 in agreement with the PUK, and another two-year as decided by the Kurdistan Consultative Council, in violation of law not only in Kurdistan Region but also of the Iraqi Constitution (Articles 1, 13). Barzani finally resigned in November 2017 following the failure of the independence referendum and the crisis it brought, and the position of the Kurdistan Region Presidency was suspended until its reactivation two years later, in May 2019, with the nomination of Nechirvan Barzani). Barzani's extension was seen as antidemocratic by parties such as Goran and Kurdistan Islamic Group and was met with opposition in the Kurdish street during protests to pay public sector workers in October 2015.[10]

Moreover, the democratic deficit that the Kurdistan Region faces goes hand in hand with corruption, nepotism, and lack of transparency vis-à-vis revenues and how they are spent amidst serious socio-economic problems and crackdown on dissent. The media landscape is also characterised by high levels of corruption, with media - both partisan and "shadow" media - serving the agendas of the ruling parties. Furthermore, independent journalists and media face repression, from threats to arrests, and in some cases, even murder.[11] Within this gloomy environment, aggravated by economic problems, trust in the KRG's institutions seems to decline while dismay has also been evident in the migration wave which began in early 2020 and has been the "highest since the Kurdish civil war in the 1990s" according to Abdulla Hawez.[12]

In conclusion, in light of these serious internal shortcomings aggravated by the internal rivalries between and within the two ruling parties -intra-KDP and intra-PUK rivalries – and the regional developments, the Kurdistan Region faces serious challenges. Recently, another blow hit its economy and its negotiation leverage with Baghdad: the Paris-based International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) decided on March 23, 2023, that Turkey had violated a 1973 bilateral treaty with Iraq by facilitating independent oil exports from the Kurdistan Region. The suspension of oil exports followed the decision; yet, an agreement was reached between Erbil and Baghdad and the Iraqi government requested Turkey to resume exports. Ankara has not responded as of May 13, 2021. This development would undoubtedly have significant implications for Erbil's capacity to independently manage oil exports and negotiate with Baghdad.[13] It remains to be seen how Kurdish political actors will navigate these circumstances and determine their priorities domestically and regionally in this changing environment.

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THE 2003 US INVASION OF IRAQ

THE DAY THAT CHANGED JIHAD(ISM)

Marina Eleftheriadou

2023 marks the 20th anniversary of the US invasion of Iraq. The invasion had important repercussions for Iraq and the region as a whole. It had a profound impact on the salafi-jihadist movement as well, arguably more perennial than that of the 9/11 attacks. The article focuses on two specific aspects of this impact. First, the sectarianisation of politics and conflicts in the region, which engulfed equally the salafi-jihadist movement. Second, the 'reinvention' of terrorist spectacle and its introduction into the Internet era via decapitation and attack videos by al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and its leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. In sum, the US invasion provided the space for the introduction of jihadist innovations that were further developed by AQI's successor group, ISIS, and left a lasting impact on the jihadist conflict paradigm.

ON MARCH 19, 2003, the US initiated what in retrospect would become a turning point in modern Middle East history. The US-led invasion of Iraq had a tremendous impact on various aspects of Middle East politics, which at that time very few—if any—could gauge to its full extent. The 2003 invasion did not spur a radical reconfiguration of the region; or, at least, not of the kind that the neo-conservatives, who then reigned US foreign policy making, envisaged. No democratic wave occurred, even though the 2003 invasion indirectly spurred the Arab uprisings few years later, and the region's autocratic regimes were not replaced by pro-American burgeoning liberal democracies. Instead, 'upgraded authoritarianism',[1] conflict and sectarianism engulfed the region.

The end of dual containment, which for years preserved a delicate but effective balance between Iraq and post-1979 Iran, set the foundations for a regional cold war between Iran and Saudi Arabia, characterised by 'sectarianised' proxy wars. The fall of Baghdad and Iraq's persisting inability to 'get back on its feet' had an additional impact of equal—and for the people of the region perhaps bigger—importance. Before the dust of the advancing US troops had settled, Iraq started its descent into violence. The Iraqi insurgency started as a patchwork of different groups opposing US occupation. The Coalition Provisional Authority, which supervised the Iraqi 'transition to democracy', and the coalition forces that were tasked with security and stabilisation presumed that the violence was the work of groups led by Ba'athist officers that were stubbornly oblivious to their defeat. De-Ba'athification and popular disdain were destined in their mind to make it crystal clear very soon. However, violence intensified and instead of seasoned military officers brandishing the selected works of Michel Aflaq or copies of *Zabibah and the King*,[2] the coalition troops arrested bearded men who despised Ba'athism as much as they did.

In May 2004, a video appeared showing the beheading of Nicholas Berg, an American contractor who had been abducted in Iraq the previous month. The man wielding the knife was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Quite ironically, he was featured in the infamous address of then Secretary of State, Colin Powell, to the UN Security Council.[3] In his speech, Powell meticulously weaved allegations about Iraq's stockpile of 'weapons of mass destruction' with Saddam Hussein's alleged links to al-Qaeda, claiming that al-Zarqawi and his then group Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad were hosted in Iraq and received training in the use of chemical and biological weapons. Even though subsequent evidence—or lack thereof—and Powell himself revealed that these allegations were exaggerated or fabricated altogether, few jihadists at that time could boast of their name being mentioned as the 'beating heart' of the international community.

In just two years, before his death in June 2006, al-Zarqawi managed to become the 'face' and the catalyst in the transformation of salafi-jihadism. Arguably, in retrospect, his impact might be compared to that of Sayyid Qutb, Abdallah Azzam, Osama bin Laden and Abu Musab al-Suri. His influence was not in the realm of ideas. He was neither a scholar, nor an ideologue; he was a practitioner. In this capacity, he infused salafi-jihadism with strategies and practices, some of which would fully manifest only later, when his successors, namely Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, would set the region and the jihadist movement on fire. In other words, without al-Zarqawi—and for that matter without the US invasion of Iraq—there would be no 'Islamic State' as we know it.

Al-Zarqawi's influence was twofold. On the one hand, he 'reimagined' terrorism's quest for spectacle, bringing it to the era of

the information highway and insatiable desire for new thrills and emotional stimulation. Nicholas Berg's decapitation video can be compared to the 1972 Munich hostage crisis in terms of revolutionising the media-terrorism nexus. The latter introduced live broadcast of terrorist attacks, while the former pushed terrorism through the 24-hour news cycle and into the Internet era. In the days following the video's release, Berg's decapitation featured in the top three search terms worldwide; 'dethroning' Britney Spears and Paris Hilton.[4] Gruesome decapitation recordings were soon complemented with an assortment of videos depicting raids, roadside bombs and other IED attacks against coalition troops. Some of them were sold in Middle Eastern souks, reminiscent of Khomeini's cassette tapes prior to the Iranian Revolution, but they increasingly found their way to the still unregulated spaces of YouTube and other video-sharing platforms. The so-called 'Islamic State' built on this tradition and expertise. The grained footage of the early years was gradually replaced with professionally-edited and carefully-choreographed productions;[5] a trend that even the most 'traditionalist' groups felt pressured to follow. Videos of hostages dressed in the familiar orange jumpsuit of Guantanamo prisoners, on the other hand, changed little over the years; a grisly homage to Berg's video or merely an acknowledgement of their powerful simplicity, as their adoption by other groups outside the salafi-jihadist suggest.[6]

The second influence of al-Zarqawi was limited to the salafi-jihadist movement, but it was no less ground-breaking. The initial phase of the post-invasion insurgency primarily involved attacks against the coalition troops, international institutions and foreign nationals. In early 2004, al-Zarqawi changed strategy and shifted his targeting towards 'internal enemies', namely the Shia. It is debatable whether al-Zarqawi was driven by deep personal anti-Shia beliefs or he believed that attacks against the Shia would boost recruitment among disenfranchised Sunnis, who felt that they were relegated from 'rulers' of Iraq to second-class citizens by the US-imposed empowerment of the Shia and de-Ba'athication. Whatever the motive, the strategy worked as the attacks against Shia shrines in Baghdad and Karbala forced Shia groups to retaliate, leading to tit-for-tat violence and eventually a civil war. Al-Qaeda was uneasy with al-Zarqawi's anti-Shia turn and generally the overuse of excommunication (takfir), as intercepted communications revealed;[7] yet, the 'besieged' al-Qaeda Central could not easily discount al-Zaqawi's success and influence. By accepting al-Zarqawi's pledge of allegiance (ba'ya) and by allowing him to use the al-Qaeda brand and rename his group to al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in October 2004, al-Qaeda legitimised 'takfir' and further fostered sectarianism; a trend that crossed the borders of Iraq and 'infected' the wider region, showing its truly destructive impact in neighbouring Syria.

Twenty years after the US invasion of Iraq, many of the protagonists of that time are dead, but their legacy is far from bygone. The US invasion did not only fail to achieve its stated goals, but it left a footprint that might take another twenty, if not more, years to erase. Ba'ath might not have returned triumphant, as happened in

Afghanistan where Taliban recaptured Kabul during US troops' hasty withdrawal, yet Iraq remains divided, constantly teetering on the brink of conflict and collapse. The 'Islamic State' is no more defeated than AQI after the death of al-Zarqawi, lurking in the shadows until the next opportunity arises. Quite possibly, the assessment of the US invasion at the 30th anniversary in 2033 will be even more damning.

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ON THE MARGINS OF WAR

Politicisation in the Middle East alongside the US-led Iraq Invasion

Ihab Shabana

This article will explore the anti-war mobilisation that took place against the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. It will investigate how the anti-war movement presumed previous forms of anti-globalisation organisational structures. What we will argue is that the 2003 war in Iraq, alongside the second Palestinian Intifada, paved the way for mounting grassroots contentious politics in some Arab countries. A special focus on the anti-war Cairo Conferences and, thus, in Egypt as an activism hub will be put.

DESPITE BEING A "FRIEND" of the Islamic Republic of Iran during the 1980s, Saddam Hussein had already been targeted in the early 1990s with the first Gulf War and his invasion of Kuwait. Back then, global anti-war reflexes were considered as "failed";[1] they not only failed to prevent or stop the first Gulf War, but also the movement largely failed to sustain or generate a wider resistance platform. In addition, the first Gulf War divided many political organisations in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), with regard to balancing between ideology and interests; for example, many criticised the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), which supported Saddam's invasion of Kuwait.

However, the second Gulf War showcased a paradigm shift. Already engaged with several sociopolitical concerns since mid-1990s, such as the Chiapas movement against the NAFTA agreements (1994) or the "Battle of Seattle" (1999), global movements were becoming increasingly active, paving, thus, the way for opening new channels of communication and novel resistance repertoires, which led to the creation of the World Social Forum (WSF) in 2001. The adversary was overall common, whatever its manifestations; neoliberal globalisation. Global anti-war movements felt strong enough to organise worldwide protests against the invasion of Iraq. Indeed, the coalescence of anti-war and anti-corporate globalisation forces led to an undoubted enlargement of the anti-war movement all over the world, including those existing in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Using political opportunity structure (POS) theory to explain alliances and strategies,[2] this article will attempt to showcase how late organisation structures in MENA were reinvigorated, partly due to the anti-war movement.

Organisations & Repertoires

In general, literature shows that most Arab governments were either complacent or even supported the invasion. However, a closer observation reveals that the war in Iraq, in terms of the making of social movements, allowed the Arabs to bifurcate their resistance towards both genuine grassroots movements and broad cross-ideological alliances. The emerging contentious repertoires included, among others, platforms, petitions, attending meetings and some demonstrations. Already active with platforms built in the early 2000s with the outburst of the second Intifada in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and against normalisation with Israel (such as the Popular Arab Jordanian Committee for Resisting Submission and Normalization in 1992), some Middle Eastern countries became a hub for social and political activism against the war. Cairo was such an example, with multinational committees arriving in the Egyptian capital as early as 2002, launching the "Cairo Anti-War Conference," ignoring the general oppressing reality in the country.[3] The conference protested the Arab leaders' inertia and their servitude towards the US.

In October 2002, the US congress granted the authority to G. Bush for an attack against Iraq. Then, the 2002 Cairo Declaration, organised by the Egyptian Popular Campaign to Confront US Aggression (set up by the Egyptian Bar Association in September), promulgated by 400 activists from across the Middle East and the global peace movement, fiercely condemned US' intentions while also addressing Israel's aggression against the Palestinians. The conference attracted Nasserists, Islamists, Marxists and members of trade unions and professional syndicates, involving, thus, people and intellectuals from a wide ideological spectrum.[4] Connecting

the movement as a development of the global anti-globalisation it promulgated four important points: global capitalism and US hegemony, the corruption and servitude of the Arab states, total opposition to the war in Afghanistan and Iraq and the further coordination in order to empower the global anti-war movement.[5]

Repertoires of contention further included resistance from intellectuals, such as the refusal from the Egyptian novelist Sonallah Ibrahim to receive the Arab Novel Award in 2003. Ibrahim chose instead to attend the ceremony and deliver a speech accusing the Egyptian and other Arab regimes of "lacking credibility" due to their passive concession to the debacle of Iraq and Palestine.[6] In 2004, the Egyptian judge and historian Tareq Bishri issued a public letter calling for Ghandi-style civil disobedience, urging people to non-violent protests and forms of individual and collective actions.

Apart from the Mubarak regime, several other Arab countries, such as Jordan, Syria, and Tunisia, allowed the growing manifestation of anti-war politics. Following a political opening in the early Bashar al-Assad's presidency in 2000-2002, Syria witnessed vast demonstrations against the war.[7] Jordan was also rocked by protests involving students and workers since the Jordanian monarchy granted permission allowing US forces to cross towards Iraqi borders.[8] By allowing the conferences and the protests, Arab rulers deflected public anger to what was perceived as "Western aggression towards the Arabs", while concomitantly appearing to be criticising the war.[9] The Cairo Conference was ever since held annually and its agenda included not only the war in Iraq and Palestine but it gradually also incorporated social and political predicaments which were framed with a cross-ideological oppositional character. This is one of the reasons why Mubarak gradually harassed and ultimately, in 2009, banned the conference. As M. Browers notes for Egypt's case (the conferences) "created momentum for development of a movement for domestic political reform."[10] This positioned Cairo as the centre for reversing political relations. These political opportunity openings created open critiques towards the so-called "gumlukiyyat" (a combination of gumhuriyat-republic and malakiyat-monarchy), generating creative contentious space for students, trade-unionists, and intellectuals.

Impact and Legacy for 2011

The various anti-war platforms, initiatives and debates allowed local and transnational groups to create links, intellectual and ideological exchanges but also organisational connections. In a changing political environment characterised by political opportunity openings and an influence by *tanwir* ideas,[11] the anti-war movement had the opportunity to engage more actively and critically with forms of international and local oppression. A chain of contentious episodes across the Middle East after the 2003 Iraq invasion, such as protests and labour strikes in Egypt, Tunisia and even Lebanon in 2005, confirms

this current. For example, the Egyptian Movement for Change, otherwise known as Kifaya, brought domestic issues over the political agenda combining them simultaneously with the Arab causes. As M. Browers suggests, the anti-war movement generated several other groups across the political and professional spectrum, such as students, workers and artists. For many scholars such as John Chalcraft, the usual outlets for public anger, namely the US and Israel, were enriched with discontent towards local regimes and demands for social, economic and labour rights after the 2000s. Undoubtedly, the resurgence of forms of collective actions was interrelated to the previous anti-war movement mobilisation, expanding, thus, social and political networking.[12]

Regional and global peace and justice movements attracted some harsh but also inspiring critique due to some serious ideological flaws. For the moderate Islamist Tariq Ramadan, other than cultural flaws, the anti-war movement had two serious deficiencies; the lack of a proposed alternative for Iraq after Saddam and the grave, or even dangerous, misinterpretations of Islamic cultural and political reality by a number of activists. In addition, for many activists Saddam Hussein constituted a minor threat to world peace than US' quest for global hegemony.[13] Moreover, as the Schuman Incident reveals (a verbal conflict between a German journalist, accusing Iraq's poor human rights record, and a member of the Iraqi delegation defending his country), some stressed that the conferences were an expedient for Arab regimes to promote their causes.

However, according to Mark LeVine, the millennium brought to the fore a series of movements ostensibly incongruous but with similar perspectives and strategies against US' global hegemony. These included a focus on culture as a strategic weapon, a reverse in the idea of progress and an instrumentalisation of local and peripheral history.[14] Besides, after the invasion in Iraq, the World Social Forum, already active since 2001, clearly emphasises the Middle East and Islam, a process deriving from the "war against terrorism." Further, the European Social Forums mobilised the large Arab-Muslim communities in European countries, especially in Britain and France, converging Muslim communities with leftist organisations, such as the Respect Party experiment in Britain shows.

In short, beginning with the support committees to the second Palestinian Intifada in the early 2000s, in turn, the anti-war movement, especially in Egypt which attracted global activism, generated new forms and spaces of mobilisation and collective identities while the articulation of a new discourse of secular opposition proliferated. These collective forms of contentious politics involved a more egalitarian and leaderless mindset of resistance, something that eventually matured and was omnipresent in the uprisings of 2011.

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9. Mark LeVine, *Why They Don't Hate Us: Lifting the Veil on the Axis of Evil* (Oxford: One World, 2005), 233.

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11. The Tanwir period, starting approximately around 1990s, was a period of debates (especially across Cairo and Damascus) that aimed at re-locating social and political discussions. Thus, tanwir debates addressed the socio-economic realities and challenges at the end of the 20th century, focusing on issues such as civil rights, citizenship, democracy, and social justice.

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THE EVOLUTION OF US STRATEGIC CULTURE

Examining Iraq's post-war era

Ilias Tasopoulos

Contrary to domestic conditions and international developments, a country's strategic culture changes very slowly. By examining the impact of the Iraq war on the United States' strategic culture, several trends are identified, including a reevaluation of its international involvement, a departure from the reliance on robust ground forces as a means of achieving objectives and the adoption of a more adaptable military approach.

IN THE UNOFFICIAL IRAQ WAR'S twenty years' anniversary, the US Senate cast its vote in March 2023 in favour of repealing the resolution that had previously authorised the invasion of Iraq. This bipartisan endeavour aimed to restore the authority of the Congress over matters of war, two decades after the initial authorisation of an adventure, now widely regarded as an error and a burden on the American political system's conscience.[1]

Since then, intense debates and divisions within the country have been sparked, while protests against the decision to go to war quickly succeeded the initial fervor. However, it is important to remember that, in the first period after the swift victory, influential figures in the White House were thinking of following the same example in other countries, such as Iran, as they believed that the perceived success of Iraq's transformation would force rogue states to abide by American wishes. Although discussions did not result in a direct US attack on Iran after the swift victory, military options were considered in the George W. Bush administration until 2005.[2]

This predisposition towards using force unilaterally has been part of the American strategic culture.[3] One of the most significant changes that occurred because of the 2003 Iraq War was a shift towards a more cautious and flexible approach to military intervention. Prior to the invasion, many US policymakers and military leaders believed that the United States had acquired the ability to defeat any enemy quickly and decisively using overwhelming force. However, the prolonged and costly nature of the aftermath of the Iraq War demonstrated the limits of American military power. Maintaining geopolitical stability has gradually become more important for American interests as its orientation returned to the cultural paradigm that had dominated the previous years of the Cold War.

Even if the American military presence in the Middle East gradually downsised, appeals to withdraw US troops from Iraq and Afghanistan became even louder. Eventually, the completion of their withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 marked the end of the war effort. Despite the leadership of Barack Obama with its outward-looking approach, a renewed emphasis on prioritising domestic concerns over international engagement and a desire to reduce the United States' involvement in global affairs appeared.[4] Washington opted to "lead from behind" in Libya and refrain from intervention in many cases during the Arab uprisings. Even when pressed to react to barbaric acts in Iraq, military actions against ISIS were conducted as part of the broader US counterterrorism efforts, which supported regional allies and no further action was taken.

After the 2016 presidential campaign and the subsequent election of Donald Trump, US foreign policy emphasis of internationalism started to fade, and neo-isolationism became a prominent feature of US foreign policy debates. Trump's "America First" rhetoric and policy agenda signalled a departure from the post-World War II consensus on international cooperation and multilateralism. A wave of neo-isolationism had emerged, assuming a lot of forms, ranging from withdrawing American forces from all over the globe to even criticising the United States' involvement in international organisations, such as the United Nations. In any case, avoiding political and military conflict across the globe, on the basis of its exceptionalism, has always been part of American strategic dogma and is closely related to the culture of the United States.

The Iraq debacle has illustrated that embarking on a preventive war is not a suitable method for serving the American interests.[5] The difficulties faced in stabilising the country and achieving the stated objectives created scepticism and criticism regarding the use of unilateral military force.

The change of threat perceptions has also influenced the country's national security objectives and military planning. The concern about the presence and activities of terrorist organisations in the Middle East, such as Al-Qaeda and its affiliates, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and other extremist groups remained, but a different method of neutralising them was promoted. Adapting to irregular conflicts and conventional wars at the same time has been incorporated into the United States objectives.[6] The renewed emphasis on Multi-Domain Operations has been based on the US' previous experiences and the development of the country's strategic culture.[7]

The United States have recognised the need for a more adaptable strategy that would be able to respond to the changing nature of conflicts, including the rise of militant non-state actors and the increasing importance of asymmetric warfare. This has led to a greater emphasis on intelligence collection, special operation forces, and the use of unmanned aerial vehicles and other advanced technologies, along with the reevaluation of traditional approaches to warfare. Maintaining a global presence and rapidly shifting forces to address emerging challenges certainly includes the coordination of allied forces.

Following the difficulties of the post-conflict environment in Iraq, the United States have also opted for a different approach to state-building. The execution of Saddam Hussein proved on a symbolic level that the removal of a dictator did not lead to a widespread abandonment of seats by other dictators in the Middle East, as the majority of the authoritarian regimes eventually proved vigilant. Washington seems to have stopped pursuing state-building as part of its broader military interventions that aimed at removing existing regimes.

The withdrawal from Afghanistan was indicative in this respect, as the bilateral agreement between the Taliban and the United States, according to which the Taliban agreed to prevent any international terrorist groups or individuals from using Afghan soil to threaten the security of the United States and its allies, now seems adequate for Washington. Even if they approach Taliban actions with caution and scepticism, the United States have been keen to find common ground with powers with a completely different ideology, steering away from transforming the region to its own image.

By deciding to end its military involvement in Afghanistan, the United States have opted to reallocate resources and attention to other strategic priorities, including addressing the challenges posed by great power competition. Joe Biden argued that the final withdrawal of American forces would enable the US to implement their new plans. "We're engaged in a serious competition with China. We're dealing with the challenges on multiple fronts with Russia. We're confronted with cyberattacks and nuclear prolifera-

tion. We have to shore up America's competitive[ness] to meet these new challenges in the competition for the 21st century. And we can do both: fight terrorism and take on new threats that are here now and will continue to be here in the future," the American president concluded.[8]

There is a new impetus to US operations in the horizon, one where technological superiority is incorporated into its military strategy. Cutting-edge technologies are utilised, as shown by the latest operations in the Middle East, where drones eliminate high-ranking members of radical organisations. The Iraq War seems to have precipitated a paradigm shift in the United States' strategic culture, as it prompted a reevaluation of its international involvement and a departure from the reliance on robust ground forces as a means of achieving strategic objectives, towards a more resilient approach to military involvement.

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THE SHIA FACTOR IN IRAQ

QUESTIONS ON UNITY, THE IRANIAN INFLUENCE AND THE FUTURE OF IRAQI POLITICS

Alexandra Nikopoulou

After 2003 and the fall of Saddam, Iraqi Shias gained a prominent role in the political scene of Baghdad yet were often viewed as Iranian proxies. Iranian influence in Iraq is strong and Tehran has an interest in maintaining friendly relations with Baghdad in order to use Iraq as a buffer zone that could protect it from the presence of US forces in the region and eventually lead to their withdrawal.[1] This has enhanced the misconception that all Iraqi Shias are united under the Iranian umbrella; however, the reality is much more complex. The fall of Saddam did, in fact, enable the rise of previously marginalised, Shia actors, who have dominated Iraqi politics after 2003. Yet, these actors have different interests and their relationship with Tehran is often affected by their view on the role of religion in politics and their perceptions regarding Tehran's motives in the country. It is, thus, important to review the variety of Shia actors in Iraq in the post-2003 nexus, identify their connections to Iran and understand the complex dynamics that affect Iraqi politics and enhance intra-Shia divisions.

SHIA FACTORS IN IRAQ should not only be examined under the light of their relationship with Iran. Iraq itself is a country of particular importance for Shiism, while it is also home to the second most important Shia city, Najaf. Contrary to the Iranian model of velayat el-faqih, the Iraqis have embraced a form of quietist Shiism (also due to the fact that during the reign of Saddam, and particularly in the period of the Iran-Iraq war, supporters of Khomeini were either executed or exiled and the Iraqi leader only allowed the practice of quietist Shiism).[2] After 2003, Shias gained a prominent position in Iraqi politics and played a pivotal role during the transitional period, supported both by the US and Iran.

This, however, also led to the fragmentation of the Shia camp and the rise of different actors who tried to claim their share of power. In general, we can identify three distinct Shia factions operating in Iraqi politics: the pro-Iranian, the pro-Sistani and the Sadrists. Iran's revolution played a major role in inspiring the formation of Shia parties and organisations during the 1980s and Tehran has systematically offered support to its affiliates in Iraq. By 2017, there were at least ten pro-Iranian parties in the country. Some include the Badr Organisation (founded in Iran in 1982 and returning to Iraq after 2003), Kataib Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Kataib Imam Ali. Most of these groups started as militias that later participated in political processes. It is noteworthy that smaller parties are more reliant on Iran for funding, training and advisory support; thus, they are more closely tied to Iranian interests. A special mention should be made to Dawa, the oldest Shia Party in Iraq (founded in 1952) and one that played a major role in the post-2003 order. Between 2006 and 2014, Nouri al-Maliki, the head of the party, served as Prime Minister of the country and adopted a largely pro-Iranian approach. Yet by 2014, having failed to counter the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)' threat, he was forced to resign from his post, while remaining active in Iraqi politics.[3] As for Sistani, his role as *marja* has offered him significant leverage, yet, to this day, he has been following a quietist, apolitical approach, focusing more on unity and human rights. His authority had allowed him to have a large following and impact developments in the Iraqi political scene during critical junctures (e.g., when he issued a fatwa allowing participation in the fight against ISIS), yet he has not tried to assume a more active role in Iraqi politics.[4]

As for the Sadrist movement, its origins can be found in the 1970s, but it became more active after the assumption of leadership by Muqtada al-Sadr in 1999. Sadr is a nationalist figure and claims to represent a "Shiism from within" as his movement was not one of those found in exile. He appears to be both anti-American and anti-Iranian, despite maintaining some relations with Tehran. He stands against corruption and sectarianism and draws his supporters from poor neighbourhoods in large cities and lower classes, as his movement provides extended support for the poor through social welfare. In 2003, he founded the Mahdi Army, with the support of Iran, and in 2004 he declared a holy war against the US. Notably, he was not included in the first transitional government. Throughout the years, he engaged in a rivalry with Ali Sistani, the Iraqi Armed Forces and Iran following the movement's considerable advances in the southern parts of the country. In 2011, Sadr returned to Iraq (after being self-exiled in Iran) by rebranding himself as an Iraqi nationalist. In the following years, his movement participated in several anti-government demonstrations in 2016, 2019 and later. Interestingly, he has also made openings to the Arabs by visiting Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Jordan and Egypt. This strategic

decision can be perceived as a way to counterbalance Iranian influence in Iraq and ensure alternative options that could allow him to gain leverage against Tehran.[5]

Divisions in the Shia camp were also visible during the rise of ISIS in the country and the formation of the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) that aimed to tackle the jihadist threat. Despite Iran maintaining a clear hand in the PMF and having trained and advised some of its constituents through the IRGC, there were also PMF factions closer to Sistani and Sadr. In 2014, Sistani himself issued a fatwa calling Iraqis to participate in the PMF against ISIS, while Sadr participated in the Forces through his Peace Regiments. In general, due to al-Maliki's and Iran's role in the PMF, the Forces have often been competing with the central Iraqi government following al-Maliki's resignation.[6]

Lastly, prior to the 2021 crisis, in the decade between 2010-2020, Iraq experienced several waves of popular protests, while discontent regarding the confessional system has been growing consistently. Since the 2010 elections, there has been a steady increase in the popularity of parties and coalitions that question the confessional system and sectarian divisions in Iraqi politics. Both Sistani and Sadr have been part of the critics of the regime and the Iranian-backed order in the country. Sadr himself has repeatedly questioned the system and tried to hijack the demonstrations to increase his own influence while subsequently participating in political processes after realising the potential political gains.[7]

Tensions in the Shia camp escalated following the 2021 elections when the Sadrist party scored a landslide win against its rivals in the Shia Coordination Framework, which was the second largest Shia coalition entering the Iraqi parliament. In order to proceed with the formation of a national majority government – which was requested by the Shia Coordination Framework, in accordance with processes followed after 2003 – the Sadrists cooperated with the Sunni Arabs and the Kurdistan Democratic Party. However, the government formation process proved futile as the Kurds failed to reach a consensus on their proposal regarding the presidency (that is reserved for a Kurd), and the Sadrist-led coalition was unable to ensure support from the two-thirds of the parliament. Even Iran stepped in to defuse tensions as the commander of the Quds Force visited Baghdad to support the Kurds to reach a consensus. This failure led to a rather miscalculated move by Sadr, who had his MPs resign from parliament and announced his own resignation from politics. This move was intended to put pressure on his rivals, yet the latter decided to take advantage of Sadr's decision and filled the parliament seats with their own representatives, also announcing their own candidate for the seat of the Prime Minister.[8] This candidate was no other than Mohamed Shia al-Sudani, an ally of al-Maliki and the Dawa party. When he eventually assumed the post of Prime Minister, Sudani announced the formation of a PMF trading company with a significant budget, signaling that the PMF had now regained its leverage in the Iraqi government and was making a comeback.[9]

These developments not only led to the empowerment of the Shia Cooperation Framework and its allies but also caused a wave of popular demonstrations as Sadr's supporters repeatedly stormed the Green Zone (where the governmental palace and the government building are located) and engaged in battles with Iraqi security forces, supporters of the Shia Coordination Framework and Iran-backed militias. Among the demands of the Sadrists were the dissolution of the parliament and the holding of new elections. Sadr's retirement and his calls for revolution enhanced intra-Shia fractions and had severe consequences to the stability and cohesion of Iraqi society. His ability to control the masses is unprecedented in Iraqi politics and could lead to a deeper confrontation between the Sadrists and pro-Iranian groups, particularly in the southern parts of the country, where Sadr is most powerful. Tensions within the Sadrist camp also contributed to the instability as, during this period, the spiritual leader of the Sadrist movement, Kazem al-Haeri announced that he would step down from his duties due to health reasons and called his followers to divert their allegiance to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. This decision was unprecedented for two main reasons; the first one is that usually a spiritual leader serves his role for the entirety of his life. The second lies in the fact that during his withdrawal announcement, Haeri urged his followers to obey Sadr's rival, while also inferring that Sadr himself did not have the qualifications to serve as a religious leader to the movement. Haeri's decision and the way he announced his withdrawal only perplexed the dynamics in the Sadrist camp and could lead to a renewed escalation of intra-Shia tensions.[10] With the possibility of Sistani's succession approaching, Sadr could utilise his strong social following to claim the position of the Marja and change his predecessor's approach to Iraqi politics. This, however, would put him at odds with his rivals in the Shia Cooperation Front, the PMF and the Dawa.[11]

This constant struggle for power, the complex dynamics and conflicting interests of the numerous Shia actors operating in Iraqi politics indicate that achieving long-term stability in Baghdad is highly unlikely. And even though Iran holds a central role in affecting domestic developments in Iraq, it is far from controlling all Shia players in the country. With tension still simmering, the future of Iraqi politics remains uncertain.

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The Religious Minorities in Iraq since 2003

Between Sectarian Violence and Political Marginalisation

Charitini Petrodaskalaki

The Papal visit to Iraq in 2021 brought the attention of the international community to the plights of what was left of a once pluralistic and multicultural Iraq. In the last two decades, the population of religious minorities has plummeted as they were caught amid sectarian violence and political bargains between Erbil and Baghdad, with few options but to flee. For those left behind, they witnessed their lack of protection and political marginalisation. Is it possible for Iraq to remain a multireligious society?

IRAQ, SITUATED ON THE LANDS known as ancient Mesopotamia, is the birthplace and home of multiple ethnicities and religions. Their population might be small in terms of numbers, but it is incredibly diverse: Christians - mainly Chaldeans, Assyrians, Syriac and Armenian - Yazidis, Sabean-Mandeans, Jews, Baha'is, Zoroastrians, Kakais (or Yarsan) and Shabaks, forming together an intricate pluralistic mosaic. On the eve of the US-led invasion in 2003, religious minorities constituted about 10 per cent of the Iraqi population. Currently, they represent less than 3 per cent. For example, the Christian population has fallen from 1,5 million Christians in 2003, to less than 300,000, while 90 per cent of Sabean-Mandeans, left Iraq between 2003 and 2019.[1] Therefore, Iraqi society's delicate religious and cultural fabric has been threatened repeatedly in the last two decades and is currently on the brink of extinction.

It is of note that there was already a trend of religious minorities leaving Iraq before 2003.[2] While freedom of religion was tolerated and most religious minorities were technically protected, in the last years of its rule, the Ba'ath regime had turned towards a more Islamic approach to governance. This was in line with the society's increased religiosity following the growing hardships of two failed wars and an international embargo.[3] Saddam Hussein inaugurated the so-called "Faith Campaign" in 1993, which aimed at the revival of Islam, introducing numerous changes in the lives of Iraqis, such as banning public consumption of alcohol. What is more, the words "God is Great" were inscribed on the Iraqi flag, signalling the Muslim identity of the state. All of which worried the non-Muslim and non-Arab groups within the country. In practice, however, most religious communities were left alone as long as they complied with the regime.

Escalading Sectarian Violence

The US invasion effectively destabilised the country in terms of security and triggered a mass exodus of people. Religious minorities were particularly vulnerable not only due to the fact that they lacked the protection of tribes or emerging militias but also due to the fact that they primarily lived in urban areas, which were the hub of power struggles. The repressive nature of the post-2003 Iraqi government also created religious and ethnic hostility, creating a vacuum where religious extremism thrived. Yazidis were targeted and killed in various instances, including car bombings and executions in 2007; in 2008 a series of attacks were carried out against Christians in Mosul, and, in 2010, a massacre took place in a church in Baghdad. Sectarian violence was devastating for minority groups precisely because they were small to begin with. It is noteworthy that in 2009, Iraqi minorities constituted more than 20 per cent of the displaced people, while only 304 out of 200,000 returnees in 2012 were part of a religious minority, according to a report.[4]

The continuing deterioration of security and the advance of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014 pretty much solidified that those who had already left could not return. In the process of sectarian cleansing, militant jihadists targeted Christians, Yazidis,

Shabaks, Turkmen and Kakais, among others. Despite the long history of persecution, the scale of violence was unprecedented, and has been characterised as genocides and crimes against humanity.[5] ISIS aimed at these groups' extermination. In addition, it systematically destroyed significant religious monuments and holy sites, attempting in a way to erase any evidence of their historic presence in Iraq. Even though it was defeated, ISIS continues to be a concern, as its militants and other extremists still carry on attacks even without holding any territory.[6]

What is more, the residents Nineveh governorate, which is mostly composed of minorities, were caught not only in the fight against Islamist extremists, but also in the competition between the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and the central government of Baghdad. In Article 140 of the 2005 Constitution of Iraq, the areas of northern Iraq – which include the Nineveh governorate - that were "Arabised" during Saddam were defined as "disputed territories" between Baghdad and Erbil regarding the right to administer them. It has been noted that the Peshmerga has expanded their territories following ISIS' defeat, and many minorities accuse the Kurdish government of offering protection in exchange for submission and adherence to the Kurdistan project. There have been many issues with land seizures and attempts to change the demographic balance in these areas, such as the predominantly Christian city of Qaraqoosh, where tensions are high between the local population and the Shabak Brigade.[7] Due to the developments in the region following the advance of ISIS, calls for an autonomous region for the minorities have been reignited, a demand based on the aforementioned Article 140, with Christian (mainly Assyrian), Yazidi, Turkmen and other Iraqi leaders supporting this project.[8]

Political Participation

There is a dire need to address the Iraqi minorities' sense of political marginalisation. Since 2003, many parties have emerged with a distinct religious identity, and for the first time, Assyrian parties were allowed to run in the 2005 elections.[9] While minority groups do have reserved quota seats in both the Iraqi and Kurdish parliament, their arrangement has been systematically manipulated by the main parties in both cases. For example, while the latter has 11 seats reserved for Christians, Armenians and Turkmen candidates, the KDP is often criticised for manipulating the system by allocating all seats to the Erbil province and not where the minority populations live.

In addition, the minorities seem to be largely underrepresented in the parliaments. Out of the 329 seats in the Iraqi parliament, only nine seats where reserved for minorities (five for Christians; while the Yazidis, Shabaks, Sabean-Mandeans and Feyli Kurds each got one). These are very limited, contrasted to the number of candidates available. The rise and fall of ISIS has triggered many communities to become more active in the political system. The fact that each gets solely one seat in the parliament is problematic.[10] In addition, other groups such as Kakais and Shabaks, despite outnumbering some of the other religious groups, are not allowed to have any representative in neither the Iraqi nor Kurdish parliament under the present quota system.

There have been calls to secure appropriate political participation for minorities, as a means to show that they do have a place in Iraq and their voices are being heard. A continuous plea from the minorities is reserving the election of minority quota seats to

voters from these communities. The result of the 2021 Iraqi elections reignited the controversies over the political participation of minority groups, as the "Babylon Movement" – the political manifestation of the "Babylon Brigades", an armed militia that claimed to be Christian but does not have the support of local Christians – obtained four out of the five seats reserved for them. The recent amendments to the electoral code in March 2023, which allocated the seats traditionally reserved for ethnic and religious minorities to the major winning parties, have infuriated the Christian community, as this system is not safeguarding their interests; in response, various Christian leaders announced that they will boycott the next elections.[11] The situation, along with other recent governmental policies such as the banning of alcohol, has reinforced a widely-held view that the ruling ethno-sectarian blocs are indifferent to the pressure and suffering of minorities. Meanwhile, there are calls to revoke the seats reserved for minorities in the Kurdish parliament as well.[12]

The future of religious minorities

With their numbers continuously plummeting, much needs to be done in order to prevent the religious communities from being extinct from their land. At a lay level, there is a great need to address the discrimination against minorities, and equal protections must be offered to all citizens, Muslim and non-Muslim alike. In order to prove to the minorities that they have a place in Iraq, there needs to be a serious commitment to secure their political participation and adequate representation, but also to actively support them politically and not only use them when it is convenient to promote a pluralistic Iraq.

It is also essential to reverse the emigration trend, and possibly convince those who have left to return to Iraq, in order to revive the country's multicultural nature. This cannot happen by simply calling people to return. The authorities must give incentives for their return and solutions to the problems that made people leave in the first place; these may include the return of lands seized from the minorities and the financial compensation for those who fell victim at the hands of ISIS. Already thousands of people who remain in Iraq struggle to make ends meet, and those who have left have no place to return to, thus making it almost impossible for communities to get back on their feet. However, these are hard decisions that the authorities do not seem ready to make. Even if they were - due to the dire economic situation of the Iraqi state-, these issues are not theor priority for the time being, perpetuating the uncertainty of the future of religious minorities in Iraq.

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EXODUS AT HOME AND RETURNEES IN LIMBO

Two Decades of Internal Displacement in Iraq

Dimitris Papanikolaou

The 2003 US-led Iraq invasion initiated major waves of internal displacement, which took place in different phases and continue to this day. The main drivers behind this displacement, including widespread violence, sectarian conflicts and the destruction of state infrastructure, are mainly associated with the invasion and its legacy. Apart from the aforementioned, a significant consequence of the invasion was the ethno-religious fragmentation of Iraqi society as a result of the "nation-destroying" process. This last factor still drives displacement today and is an obstacle to their reintegration upon return, making durable intersectional solutions an essential priority to address internal displacement.

Fled but stayed: the phases of the Iraqi IDP movements

IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE US-LED INVASION IN 2003, Iraq experienced huge waves of displacement due to different factors. Twenty years after the intervention in Iraq, 9.2 million Iraqis are still displaced, either outside Iraq or within the country. Apart from the considerable number of Iraqi refugees abroad, the situation of internally displaced persons (IDPs) within Iraq is equally significant. The first phase of internal displacement started after the collapse of Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime in 2003, followed by another wave after the 2006 al-Askari Shrine bombing that triggered the civil war and nurtured sectarian conflict and persecution in Iraq. Since 2013, another 3.3 million IDPs started fleeing their homes to seek refuge across Iraq and escape not only the longstanding effects of the US-led invasion but also the atrocities committed by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).[1]

Today, in the post-ISIS era, there are 1.2 million IDPs in Iraq, most of them living in camps and informal settlements in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (KRI). Although almost 5 million IDPs have returned, they are yet struggling to reintegrate, recover their living conditions and rebuild their lives in their hometown. The drivers of internal displacement and the limiting factors for the reintegration of IDPs present many similarities and seem closely connected to the legacy of the post-invasion period in Iraq and its consequences.[2]

"Nation-building" and causes of internal displacement

According to the UN definition, IDPs are persons or groups of persons who have been forced to flee their homes as a result of or in order to avoid -among others- the effects of armed conflict situations of generalised violence and violations of human rights, by moving within national borders. In the case of Iraq, the drivers of internal displacement fall under that scope since the US-led invasion in 2003 to this day.[3]

In the last 20 years, Iraq has suffered widespread violence and insecurity, significant sectarian conflicts, major city takeovers by ISIS and insurgents, clashes with the national army, civilian persecution and the intervention of foreign powers in the conflict. Due to the protracted conflicts and insecurity, significant state infrastructures were destroyed, the Iraqi economy deteriorated and state services such as health or education became scarce or inexistent in the areas most affected. Likewise, in the post-ISIS era, ethnic and sectarian differences ingrained a lot of discrimination in the dynamics of Iraqi society. These factors complemented the matrix of drivers for internal displacement that forced millions of persons to seek refuge within safer or more conflict-freeareas of Iraq.

All the above harsh consequences that forced millions of Iraqis towards displacement were induced by the "nation-building" process set in motion in the country after the 2003 invasion and the fragmentation of the Iraqi society, which mostly affected non-Muslim and other vulnerable communities. Post-war Iraq's idiosyncrasy lies on the competing diverse sectarian and ethnic identities, which was embodied in the Muhasasa Ta'ifia, a clearly sectarianised confessional system established under the 2003 "nation building" model. This system mostly empowered Shias and Kurds, while marginalising all other Iraqi communities.[4]

Apart from the governing model and its sociopolitical and economic impact, minorities eventually faced other adversities that forced them into displacement, starting with the civil war between Sunni and Shia forces. After ISIS took over Mosul in 2014, non-Muslim and

non-Sunni minorities were widely persecuted and, as a result, fled to escape the bloodshed. In the same year, the Yazidi genocide by ISIS also occurred in Sinjar. From 2014 until the recapturing of Mosul in 2017, Iraq saw its highest number of internal displacement, with the IDPs being more than 6 million. The majority of those who did not flee Iraq settled in refugee camps in KRI in their effort to find themselves the farthest from ISIS-controlled areas. It is worth mentioning that during these years, IDPs in areas under ISIS control were, in some cases, subjected to killing, torture, abuse, rape, enslavement, child recruitment and deliberate targeting.[5]

This fragmentation of Iraqi society has been following the IDPs even after their flight to other regions of the country. In the 2014-2017 period, probably the most challenging for IDPs in Iraq, Sunni Arab IDPs faced discrimination, aggression, restriction of movement and inability to reach safe locations or their own homes if controlled by KRI forces. The emergence of several militias also deteriorated the situation for IDPs, as they reportedly forced people to leave their homes and destroyed them or prevented their return based on ethnic or religious criteria. Likewise, ISIS targeted vulnerable groups such as Christians, Yazidis and Shabaks, harassed them and threatened to execute them, forcing their displacement towards the northern part of Iraq and especially the KRI region. This targeted persecution of minorities, based on discriminatory criteria, was denounced by the UN Special Rapporteur for IDPs by that time.[6]

Coming home but not feeling at home

Despite the huge waves of internal displacement in Iraq in the last two decades and the attempts to prevent their return, most of the IDPs eventually returned to their homes. Currently, around 80% of the nearly 6 million displaced persons who fled since 2014, have returned home. Namely, in its latest report, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) documented 1.1 million IDPs dispersed across 18 governorates in Iraq, a small number compared to the previous years, demonstrating that IDP returns have been taking place rapidly. Although the physical return of IDPs to their previous homes could be considered as a first step towards their reintegration, according to the IOM, more than half of returnees feel unable to prosper or to improve their lives over time and express high levels of marginalisation and neglect as equal residents. IOM categorises the prevailing barriers to the reintegration of IDPs into the following categories: obstacles to safety, security and social relations, obstacles to adequate standards of living, obstacles to accessing livelihoods, obstacles to property restitutions and obstacles to legal documentation.[7]

One of the most important barriers for IDPs is the lack of safety and security, as they cannot return to a place where they will not feel safe, especially in the case of families. According to the IOM, there still are hubs for violence and tension at all districts of return where conflict is officially over. Adequate

standards of living and livelihood, such as the availability of public services and access to water and electricity, have also been severely affected after the conflict, with residential areas and supply networks having suffered severe damages. Due to the post-conflict destruction of residential areas and community disputes, property restitution is also a significant preoccupation for returning IDPs. Finally, IDP families may face security and protection risks in their return due to a lack of essential personal documentation. In some more vulnerable categories, it is worth mentioning that according to UNICEF, an estimated 680,000 internally displaced and returnee children face obstacles to accessing education in 2023, while 699,000 children require child protection services and 990,500 individuals are at risk of gender-based violence.[8]

Social relations within the Iraqi communities are also determinant for ensuring safety and security, as the recent conflict triggered longstanding ethno-religious, tribal or political cleavages. A remarkable example of discrimination towards returning IDPs is the one against persons perceived as being affiliated with ISIS and their families, even if they did not actually join or support the group. By 2021, more than 300,000 individuals were perceived as having family ties to ISIS, of whom the vast majority were women and children. These households, apart from facing forced return and exposure to forced recruitment or other security risks, also experience violent retaliation and social, economic and educational exclusion. Returning IDPs undergo security checks on relatives, and experience stigma and discrimination, while women often face issues in obtaining death or divorce certificates and children's birth certificates. All the above limitations to the reintegration of IDPs, are of the same nature as the drivers of their initial displacement, highly connected to the protracted conflict and the legacy of the US-led invasion.[9]

Durable Solutions to end the 20-year internal displacement

Even if the displaced persons return to their place of origin physically, displacement does not end until durable solutions are achieved. Durable solutions ensure that people should no longer have specific needs linked to their displacement and that they can enjoy their rights without discrimination on account of their displacement. Likewise, the UN Principles on Internal Displacement requires state authorities to ensure that IDPs are able to return to their homes voluntarily, safely and with dignity. Deeply rooted discrimination and societal fragmentation, as consequences of the protracted conflict and "nation-destroying", still stand in Iraq. Currently, they seem to undermine compliance with the Guiding Principles, making their implementation towards durable solutions for IDPs and returnees unlikely to be achieved soon.[10]

Furthermore, there is an evident relationship between the US-led invasion legacy and the protracted internal displacement and lack of reintegration in Iraq. The aftermath of the invasion led to the further division of the ethnically and religiously fragile Iraqi nation into primordial entities, fragmenting the uniform national identity, primarily affecting minorities. Many of the drivers behind the flight of IDPs and the barriers to their integration clearly derive from this division, as deduced by the present analysis. Thus, durable solutions to address the longstanding issue of internal displacement should be assessed through an intersectional approach, taking into careful consideration all the religious and ethnic dynamics. The elimination of discrimination against IDPs is the core of achieving durable so-

lutions, and this should be the main objective and metric for measuring the returns beyond quantitative criteria. Regardless of figures going up or down, notions such as security or integration are contextual, especially in the volatile context of Iraq.[11]

The legacy of the invasion throughout all its phases had huge, prolonged and multifaceted consequences in the internal displacement phenomenon in Iraq, and few effective and long-term measures have been taken so far to address the real reasons that jeopardise the safety and dignity of IDPs and returnees. Throughout their 20-year presence in Iraq, international organisations, NGOs and other involved actors such as the UNHCR or IOM have contributed importantly in monitoring and reporting the situation of IDPs, the provision of humanitarian aid and the elaboration of policy recommendations. Nevertheless, the intervention of all actors seeking to assist IDPs in Iraq should adopt a more holistic, comprehensive and inclusive approach regarding ethno-sectarian intersectionality. Likewise, state institutions from both Baghdad and Erbil, as decision-making entities, should address internal displacement and returns through a deeper understanding of the fragmented Iraqi society and its impact on IDPs, working closely with the other competent actors and organisations to offer adequate durable solutions and address this longstanding matter.

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WOMEN'S POLITICAL MOBILISATION IN POST-INVASION IRAQ. BEYOND ORIENTALIST MISCONCEPTIONS

Christina Chatzitheodorou

Twenty years after the US-led invasion of Iraq, women have mobilised in various ways as a result of the post-occupation socio-economic situation. Prior to the 2019 protests, politically experienced women played an important role in advocating for women's rights and denouncing the sectarian system and violence that have affected their freedom of movement and bodily autonomy. In the October Revolution in 2019, women's mobilisation was even broader than in previous years; women mobilised against corruption, denouncing Iraq's dysfunctional, corrupted and sectarian governance.

CHANDRA TALPADE MOHANTY, in her book *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing and Solidarity*, criticises the way Western feminism 'theorises' about women as an ahistorical generalisation. Contrary to this ahistorical generalisation, Mohanty illustrates a more complex reality in regard to women's participation in (historical) events. The latter avoids presenting women as a 'unified' group with common interests solely on the basis of their gender. This unification based on an abstract analysis of common sex hides historically specific conditions (and hence more complex realities) based on how and where women are born and raised. The idea that all women want the same, based on an imaginary (and yet, faulty idea) of common interest based on their gender, does not help us to understand women's political mobilisation beyond an essentialised Western idea of feminism. In the same pattern, women are not characterised only by their sect and religion and an intersectional analysis is crucial to understand the more nuanced subjectivity of Iraqi women. 'Intersectionality' has arisen as a key concept in feminist, women or/and gender studies and it serves to explain a broader variety of socially generated differences. It is used to demonstrate how we can explain the division of human existence, and hence experience, along racial, gender, sexuality, class, and disability lines, without, however, diminishing one's existence in only one of them.[1] Based on the above, in order to (try to) understand women's participation in women's rights mobilisations in Iraq, orientalist misconceptions about women's pre-determined belonging in a unified group just because of their sex or/and sect should be avoided. Even though it goes beyond the scope of this article to examine the twenty-year trajectory of women's political mobilisation in detail, it is within this context of fragmentation and different positionalities, imaginaries and political visions of Iraq that Iraqi women organised in the twenty years after the US-led invasion in 2003.

Zahra Ali, in her research about women's rights groups and activism in post-occupation Iraq, provides a much more nuanced analysis of women's political activism in Iraq. Against the Western discourse that saw Iraqi women solely as victims that need saving, through interviews, she demonstrates that women in Iraq exist and think beyond the gaze of Western feminism. Throughout the twenty-year period that followed the invasion of Iraq, the women she interviewed demonstrated a common belief that the regime would have fallen eventually without the invasion and occupation led by the US. The women she interviewed and are involved in political activities in post-invasion Iraq were marginalised under the previous regime prior to the war; nevertheless, even those in favour of the fall of the regime mentioned their initial shock when the UN Security Council stated that Iraq was now occupied; and from that moment on, the fight against occupation began.[2] One of her interviewees, Nour, illustrates this general feeling by the population: "In our case, a foreign, Western country came and made the whole country fall, a state with all its institutions. This is not a proper way to act. We know that their objective was to make an entire people fall."[3] It is within this context that women's political activism emerged in post-invasion Iraq.

An important point when examining women's political mobilisation in post-invasion Iraq concerns the institutionalisation of ethnosectarianism and the violence between different sectarian groups, given that this has impacted women's political engagement. Because the occupation forces' communal allocation system allocates a certain number of posts and seats to each group (Shia, Sunni, Kurd, etc.), women in the new government represented both their gender and their communal groups. One telling example is

that one of the first major legal reforms attempted by the Interim Governing Council (IGC), brought to power by the US administration through the invasion and occupation, was to repeal the Personal Status Code (PSC) and replace it with a sectarian-based PSC.[4] A group of feminist activists fought hard to keep the 1959 law (188) and to repeal the 2003 law (137) issued by the Governing Council, which made religion and sect the first reference for individuals in their personal status laws.[5]

In the opening of the exhibition Ruptured Domesticity, Sana Murrani mentioned how the war, occupation and sectarian violence changed not only the city itself, but the way people navigated the city.[6] This point can also be gender-specific, with women changing the way they navigate Iraqi cities to avoid sectarian violence. For instance, as Zahra Ali mentions in her article, women had to change neighbourhoods to avoid being targeted by opposite militant groups. Armed organisations have intimidated and/or killed many female activists, particularly increasingly strong Islamist militias and insurgent groups. Yet and despite the deterioration of the security situation in post-invasion Iraq, women are not passive subjects; they continue to negotiate and resist everyday challenges and practical problems, results of the war and occupation.[7]

As part of Iraq's troubling politics, social movements and activists have become increasingly important, confronting the country's post-2003 political system. Popular dissatisfaction with Baghdad's governing elite has fuelled the belief that political, economic, and social change is unlikely to come from above. This feeling sparked a collaborative movement of various sections of Iraqi society, prompting them to take to the streets in a series of demonstrations throughout the 2010s.[8] The latest of this wave of protests took place in October 2019 and for over a year, Tahrir Square in central Baghdad was transformed from a vivid urban space to a revolutionary space where utopias were imagined and briefly built. What became known as the 'October Revolution' started as a popular protest movement denouncing Iraq's dysfunctional, corrupted, and sectarian governance. The demonstrators conveyed their tales of alienation from a system that has de facto institutionalised the alienation of people from one another via sectarian policies, militarism and. They told their stories through art, poetry, chants, music, and art in the streets.[9] Women played an essential part in the protests, asking for gender equality along with manifesting against the dire socio-economic conditions.

Political crises provide a window for opportunity for women to challenge the heteronormative gender roles on domesticity, reclaiming the public space with the aim of demanding change. In Iraq, the 2019 protests also provided women with a window of opportunity to reclaim the public space, previously turned into militarised spaces where sectarian violence took place. Tahrir Square in Baghdad, as well as comparable squares around the country, such as al-Habubi Square in Nasriyah, fostered unique kinds of sociability that challenged social and political structures. As Zahra Ali argues, Tahrir Square in Baghdad, Al-Habubi Square in Nasriya, and demonstration areas across the nation are places where the oppressed and controlled can exist and flourish. Women reclaimed the public space by marching, demonstrating,

occupying, organising, and making themselves visible and "loud", whether on the frontlines confronted by the brutality of Iraqi security forces or through their artwork decorating protest squares, providing care and support to injured protesters, cooking, and cleaning. The combination of gender and (hetero)sexuality, as well as rigid divides between the public and private realms, underpin patriarchal conceptions of contemporary public places, where women are perceived to belong in the domestic milieu. In this pattern, the assaults against women demonstrators and the reinforcement of hetero-patriarchal gender and sexual norms released by Iraq's governmental forces may be viewed as what Deniz Kandiyoti refers to as 'masculinist restoration': As women tried to reclaim the public space, these assaults aimed to put them back in their "rightful place"- in the domestic milieu.[10] Following the assaults, the phrase Sawt al-mar'a thawra (*a woman's voice is a revolution*) became key to the demonstrations, challenging the well-known Arabic proverb of Sawt al-mar'a 'awra (*a woman's voice is shameful*). Following Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri, Gülsüm Baydar, through her work on urban spaces of resistance in Turkey, has shown how Turkish mothers "deterritorialised", dismantling existing structures and deciphering systems that organise our bodies, identities, and words.[11] This approach based on the terminology introduced by Deleuze and Guatarri of deterritorialisation can apply to women's reclamation of the urban space in Iraq after twenty years of war and militarisation that followed the invasion. Simultaneously deterritorialisation, reterritorialisation also takes place: women in Iraq "deterritorialised" the public space to tear down the current structure and system only to reterritorialise a new one.

In sum, women's engagement, and visibility in Tishreen demonstrate the dynamic of today's women-led grassroots movements. In the last twenty years, organisations such as the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq, the Iraqi Women Network, and informal women's networks have developed to address both gender-specific and practical problems. As larger protest movements grew in Iraq, especially in the last decade, these women-led organisations expanded their focus to cover social and political problems. There is a younger generation of women demonstrators on the rise. Their demands reflect the difficulties they encounter on a daily basis in the face of economic crises, the breakdown of governmental institutions and services, waves of sectarian violence and militarism, and the emergence of heteropatriarchal conservatism. Gender and sect politicisation, along with the sectarian violence that erupted in post-invasion Iraq, had a tremendous impact on women, jeopardising their legal rights and control over their movement, physical freedom, and bodily autonomy. The main slogan at the heart of the 2019 uprising, 'We want a country', was an expression of what the great majority of Iraqis have lost over twenty years of war, occupation and violence: a country where its citizens, both men and women, can live and feel safe. At the same time, the demonstrators' slogans also came to represent the battle against limits on women's rights; "Your voice is not shameful; your voice is a revolution" became a rallying cry for women's rights in the country. As Taif Alkhudari argues in her report on the aftermath of the Tishreen movement, the post-protest parties and the youth revolutionaries are the best chance for Iraq to build a more egalitarian state.[12]

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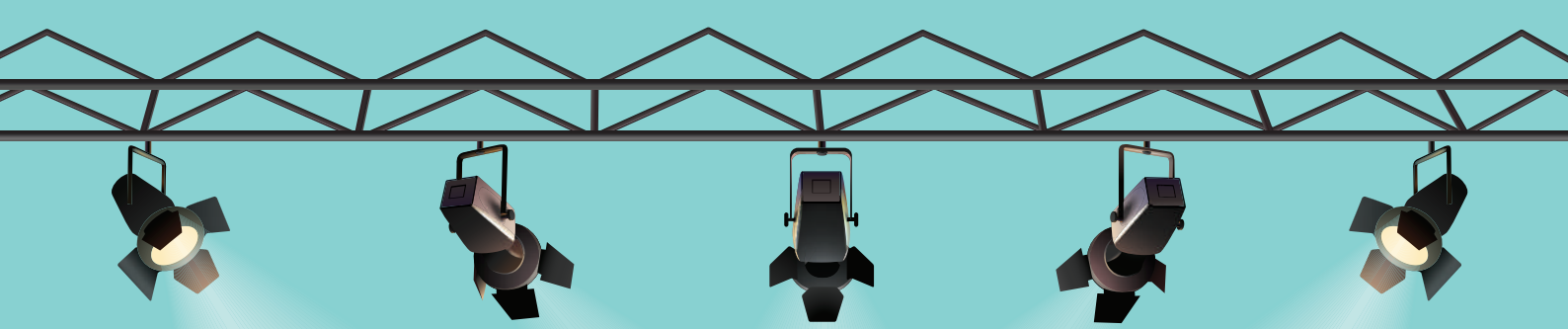

The Narrative of the Iraq War through Visual Culture

Artemis Papadaki

The Iraqi War was one of the most visually depicted conflicts in recent history. The 2003 invasion of Iraq, the long-term presence of American troops in the country, and the sectarian violence are depicted in several Hollywood movies, independent films, documentaries, and YouTube explanatory videos. Yet, twenty years later, the story is still mostly told by the US.

THE MOST NOTEWORTHY MOMENT in visual culture is the moment the two planes crash into the World Trade Center in New York City. These images played over and over again while the Bush administration started to prepare for the War on Terror. The invasion of Iraq took place one year and a half later, on March 19, after extensive preparation by the American government and media on the importance of protecting the West from fundamentalism. Fear was the main narrative circulated by the media; a narrative whose quick spread through the people was powered by the blooming state in which the media found themselves. The first years of the 21st century marked a period of change in visual media as new technologies were available to a broader public, and more images could be captured via mobile phones and reach their end destination through the internet. During the same period, lots of TV realities were brought to the public, 24/7 news channels became even more popular, and the flow of images was now constant. All these changes were also emphasised in fiction movies, documentaries and explanatory videos about the war.

Numerous war movies about the Iraq War were produced based on the stories of American and British soldiers and veterans. Movies like Hurt Locker (2008), American Sniper (2014), Grace is Gone (2007), Generation Kill (2008), Jarhead (2005, 2014, 2016), Mosul (2021), and The Marine (2006) emphasize the American experience in Iraq.[1] In most cases, the narrative ends there. Even the most anti-war films, like Sand Castle (2017), War Dogs (2016), etc., depict young soldiers feeling betrayed by their country, which leads them to die, while at the same time, the Iraqi experience is absent.

A standard way of narrating such stories is through a hero figure. The portrayal of the American soldier in the blockbuster movie "American Sniper" (2014) directed by Clint Eastwood is a prime example. The film presents the American hero of the time, a strong man ready to fight for his country and a loving husband who puts his family at the centre of his existence. The main character, Chris Kyle, who is genially pure and Christianly ethical, seems willing to go to war missions again and again, while his fellow soldiers get tired. Near the end, the film implies that Chris is suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) but even then, the viewer does not see the hero being overwhelmed psychologically or physically either on the battlefield or in his family life. The message is clear: a good soldier puts duty overall. There is nothing human about Chris's character, he is a "superman", the most well-known Sniper in Iraq, with no fear of death. The long-lasting fighting scenes, combined with the images of vast deserts and destroyed cities, paint a distorted picture of Iraq to the viewers.[2] American Sniper belongs to a long list of films praising the Bush administration and focusing only on The American experience on the field. There is no doubt that movies like the American Sniper follow a similar pattern in regard to other American interventions in the region like "13 Hours" (2016) about Libya, "Brothers" (2006) about Afghanistan. Those films deeply dehumanise the local population while stripping away its complex identities.

In those films, the representation of Iraqi civilians or ethnic and sectarian groups is nowhere to be found. The local population is displayed only during fight scenes, while most of them are playing either the "bad guy" or the "terrorist" and there is no character building concerning their views and identities.

The Netflix-produced film "Mosul" (2021) was advertised as a true exception. In a video for the promotion of the movie, the protagonist states that it is "the first movie on Netflix that my (Arab speaking) mom won't need subtitles to watch."[3] The advertisers

celebrate the fact that Arab actors will not play, yet again, the role of the terrorists. The film is based on the 2016 Battle of Mosul in which the Iraqi government toppled the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).[4] The film focuses on a group named Special Weapons And Tactics (SWAT), consisting of Arabs and Kurds who fight ISIS. "Mosul" is a war film with a twist. It features two distinct sides; and the parallels that can be drawn with a typical American war movie are too many. Like in a typical war movie, the main characters – in this case the group SWAT- are men highly driven to protect their country, fuelled with audacity and resilience. They are presented to the viewer as being from the right side of history, they are the westernised non-fundamentalist type of Arab, providing yet an essentalised idea about Iraqis. This movie does not explain the creation of ISIS or the role that the US played in the radicalisation and sectarian division of the Iraqi public. The movie is fighting tooth and nail not to be considered politically controversial, as Hollywood washes away the invasion and occupation of Iraq with movies like "Mosul."

Another common way of storytelling in films of this kind is through the prism of a group of men; a team bound together by friendship and patriotism. The group's different characters give a more light and rich tone to the film. To add authenticity, real marines are featured, handheld cinematography, sharp montage, purposefully "poor" compositions, real footage from the field, and clips seen through soldiers' video cameras, resulting in a first-person experience of the conflict for the audience.[5] The American cinema kept a self-referring tone while narrating the stories of the war in Iraq; the images that flood the American market are those of wild and dusty male soldiers holding guns and looking straight at the camera.

In the movie Hurt Locker when a soldier stops a taxi driver and forces him to change direction, someone says, "If he was not in the resistance now, he will surely be." From this phrase emerges the now confirmed American fear that there will be consequences after such an extreme attack. After all, the radicalisation was predicted by American intelligence way before the invasion of March 19 and was brought to the public by investigation documentaries and liberal TV channels in the early years of the war.

Numerous riots were taking place in the streets of all the Western countries marking a new era for the anti-war movement, especially in the US and the UK, where millions of people were protesting, "Do not attack Iraq." Interestingly, even though public denial towards the war was rising even before the invasion, the anti-war fiction movies were not at the epicentre of the pop culture scene of the time. Most of them were spinning around the same genres and character-building methods of the past, focusing mainly on the soldiers' experience.[6]

The most critical of the 2003 invasion popular films were documentaries,

which managed to capture the true question of the time yet again from an American perspective, "Why did we invade Iraq?". Numerous documentaries about the conflict were produced, especially in the first years of the war. Most of them criticise the war from a liberal point of view, starting from the terrorist attacks all the way to Afghanistan and Iraq. Documentaries like Michael Moores's "Fahrenheit 9/11 (2004), "Iraq for Sale" by Robert Greenwald and Brave New Films, "Why we Fight?" (2006) by Eugene Jarecki. Most of them are deconstructing Bushes communication campaign in their effort to unravel the real motives behind the war and provide a more nuanced analysis of the invasion.[7]

During the years of Saddam's rule there was heavy censorship and most of the films were either about the Iran- Iraq war or pro-Saddam propaganda like "The Long Days" (1980).[8] The invasion marked a new era for the Iraqi cinema, a new generation of filmmakers was for the first time free to express their artistic desires. Their stories are from and for the people living in Iraq dealing with segmented divisions, losses and everyday life in the midst of a war. Directors Mohamed Al-Daradji, Yahya Al Allaq and Oday Rasheed, among others, went one step further, creating the Iraqi Independent Film Center (IIFC), a vibrant cultural Hub for filmmakers in the centre of Bagdad. Lacking money and equipment, Iraqi filmmakers tried to capture the destruction using innovative storytelling. The first Iraqi-produced film to come out after the invasion was "Underexposure" (2005) by Oday Rasheed which follows a film director trying to articulate his thoughts in the first months of the invasion. The film was shot on looted and expired Kodak film. The director uses a collection of methods such as the breaking of the fourth wall, the usage of archival footage, and the usage of nonprofessional actors.[9] The film consists of short stories that are tied together by the narrator himself, resulting in a collage of the different realities of Baghdad at the time. The director describes the transitional period spanning from the era of the Saddam regime all the way to the American invasion and its consequences.

Sixteen years after the invasion, in 2021, the movie "Our River... Our Sky" (2021) by Maysoon Pachachi draws a different picture of Baghdad of 2006, from the invasion and its aftermath, where people are trying to deal with the new reality in a totally unclear future of Iraq after the fall of Saddam. Lots of its dialogues are inspired by real events. In general, most Iraqi movies are social dramas that share similarities with Italian neorealism and Iranian post-revolution cinema. Movies like "Son of Babylon" (2011), "Ahleem" (2006) by Mohamed Al Daradji and "Balanja" (2015) by Ali Raheem deal with loss and family relations or issues of resilience in a war that has not yet ended.[10] Last but not least is "Iraq: War, Love, God and Madness" (2008) by Mohamed Al-Daradji. One of the few docs of Iraqi origin. A documentary that takes us behind the scenes of the Iraqi independent cinema scene, with very interesting perspectives from the directors themselves.

Even though it did not exist in 2003, YouTube came to play an important role in providing new narratives in regard to the invasion. Twenty years later, data journalism and explanatory videos are important sources of video-based knowledge. Shorter than documentaries and with more condensed information in their effort to maintain the audience's attention, those videos are packed with information without sources; they are opinions disguised as facts. These include Vox, FiveThirtyEight, Quartz, Imperial War Museum, and creators such as Jonhy Harris with videos titled "How the US stole Iraq".[11] Those videos are even more ideologically biased than

the traditional channels because of their one-person or small team character. Additionally, the staring person, often paid only by advertisers, must try to keep their audience in order to keep getting paid. Those videos mark a new era for reporting journalism where the message must be easily understood and visually pleasing. Traditional media channels, such as Al-Jazeera English, have in recent years come up with shows made for YouTube audiences, like Al-Jazeera's Start Hear and Upfront. The shows coming from traditional media are more technically valid and careful about their messages. As the media scene is changing, new forms of videos are created for all kinds of issues, including recent history and politics.

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