Chronic Conflict: A Case Study of Iraq

Part 3: The 2003 invasion

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The 2003 Iraq War was a US-led invasion of Iraq to remove Saddam Hussein and the Ba'athist regime from power. The principal justification for the invasion, as argued by the US and UK, was that Iraq was in possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Another stated intention was to implement liberal democratic reforms, with the hope of encouraging a new era of political accountability and stability across the Middle East. Iraq's vast reserves of crude oil were a further strategic factor. As with the 1990/91 Gulf War, the Iraqi military was quickly defeated. The invasion commenced on 20 March 2003 and by 1 May the US President George Bush had announced the end of major combat operations in Iraq. However, the occupation of the country by the US and its allies precipitated a violent insurgency and the country was dragged into a state of civil war. How can the invasion and its aftermath help us to understand the contemporary state of affairs in Iraq?

The legality of the war

In November 2002 the UNSC passed resolution 1441, which gave Saddam Hussein's regime a final chance to completely disarm itself of WMD.[1] Resolution 1441 authorised international weapons inspectors to ensure Iraq's compliance with these obligations. Hans Blix headed the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC), which was charged with oversight of the disarmament processes. Blix reported to the UNSC that the Hussein regime had at times been obstructive of the process, giving some the impression that Iraq had something to hide. Ultimately the justification for the invasion was that Iraq had consistently failed to comply with the various UNSC resolutions and that in such circumstances the resolutions allowed for the use of force to disarm Iraq. Others argued that, according to international law, a further UN resolution explicitly approving of the use of force was necessary before taking any kind of military action. France and Russia, both permanent members of the Security Council, made it clear that they would veto any such resolution and so the coalition proceeded with the invasion without the additional resolution. The debate over the legality of the war has been, and remains, an intense one.[2]

A fatal error of judgment

Following the invasion, there was no evidence of any stockpiles of WMD in Iraq and intelligence suggesting the continuation of WMD programmes by the Hussein regime proved to be unfounded. Nonetheless, the US and its allies had succeeded in one of their principal aims: ousting Saddam Hussein and the Ba'athist regime. The coalition now faced the problem of building a new Iraq from the ground up. In these early days a fatal error of judgment was made: it was decided that the Iraqi military, police and intelligence services would be disbanded and that new units would be recruited and trained in their place. This meant that, almost overnight, several hundred thousand well-trained soldiers, officers and policemen were made redundant because of their association with the Ba'athist regime. Protests took place in May and June 2003 and shortly thereafter a sunni insurgency against the coalition forces began to gain momentum, drawing heavily from disgruntled former soldiers and officers.

Sectarian conflict

After the invasion, Iraq was initially governed by the occupying powers via the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). The legal basis for the CAP was established primarily by UNSC resolution 1483, which was passed three weeks after the official ending of combat operations. The resolution lent support to the US-led coalition as the legal governing authority of Iraq until elections could be held. An 'interim' Iraqi government was handed power in 2004, followed by a 'transitional' government and the drafting of a new constitution in 2005, which paved the way for a permanent government. The lead in this new government was taken by an alliance of shi'a Islamic political parties headed initially by Ibrahim al-Jafaari before he was replaced by Nouri al-Maliki. The significance of this can hardly be overstated.

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[1] Resolutions 661, 678, 687 and others from the time of the first Gulf War contained the details of Iraq's WMD obligations.

[2] See M Weller, Iraq and the Use of Force in International Law, (2010), Oxford: Oxford University Press.

The majority of Iraq's population adheres to the shi'a branch of Islam, yet under Saddam Hussein the shi'ites were marginalised and at times brutally repressed. While Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath party was secular in ideology, its membership was almost entirely composed of Iraqis from the sunni branch of Islam. Hence, when the shi'a alliance came to power in 2006 they not only had scant experience of running a country, but were also naturally distrustful of Iraq's sunnis. This situation was exacerbated by Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), who sought to undo the establishment of the shi'a-dominated government. AQI fuelled tension between sunni and shi'a groups to this end. On 22 February 2006, the organisation bombed one of the holiest sites in shi'a Islam: the al-Asqari mosque. Revenge attacks against sunnis took place immediately and plunged the country into sectarian civil conflict.

The legacy of Iraq

In response to increasing instability and isolation in the aftermath of the invasion, sunni groups formed the 'Sons of Iraq' movement to protect their communities. Some sunni groups had initially supported AQI, out of fear of oppression by the shi'a majority. However, when the extent of AQI's atrocities became clear, many of these groups turned against them and joined with the US and the Iraqi government to combat AQI. Combined with an American troop surge in 2007, this helped to significantly reduce the levels of sectarian fighting in the country. To begin with, the sunni fighters were paid directly by the US and they were promised jobs in the Iraqi security forces in the longer term. However, Nouri al-Maliki was suspicious of the sunni groups' motives and refused to fully integrate them into the military and security services in Baghdad. Consequently, many of these fighters found themselves once again isolated and unrepresented. This decision has the potential to be as damaging for Iraq as the initial decision to disband the Iraqi armed forces in 2003 because

An American soldier observes the toppling of a statue of Saddam Hussein in Bahgdad. (Source: Teachwar Blog)

it has directly contributed to the recent upheavals within the country and in neighbouring Syria. For example, some of these fighters have since pledged allegiance to the so-called 'Islamic State' organisation (which developed out of AQI). By contrast, the Iraqi Kurds have seen their power increase markedly as a result of the 2003 invasion and aftermath, with the president of Iraqi Kurdistan reiterating calls for an official independence referendum. The legacy of the invasion of Iraq has been disappointment and further protracted human suffering. Much of the deterioration in human security in the country can be blamed on the US-led invasion and occupation; Indeed, many Iraqis have come to the conclusion that life was better under Saddam Hussein's rule than the present state of affairs. However, the divisive politics of Nouri al-Maliki, particularly since the US withdrawal in 2011, and endemic corruption in Iraq are equally important factors in explaining the current crisis involving the self-proclaimed 'Islamic State'.

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Sean joins the WANA Institute as a Research Associate charged with examining the continuing Syrian refugee crisis and its impact on surrounding states, as well as performing analyses of ongoing developments in Iraq and Syria concerning the so-called "Islamic State" organisation. His research interests include the politics of refugees in Arab states, and International Relations Theory. Sean holds a First Class BA (hons) in International Relations and Politics from Keele University. He also holds an M.Litt in Middle East, Caucasus and Central Asian Security Studies from the University of St Andrews.