

The US Invasion of Iraq: The American Way of War and the Dilemmas of Counterinsurgency

The US invasion of Iraq and its aftermath illustrates both the enormous military strength possessed by the state that often, and accurately, is called the world's sole superpower, as well as many of its weaknesses. Also, it provides an excellent insight into the difficulties of counterinsurgency, demonstrating how even an overwhelmingly powerful army may find it very difficult to quash insurgents and bring order to a country, particularly if that force is perceived as an unwelcome occupier.

The “Slow Rush” to War

The United States and the dictatorial Ba'ath Party regime of Saddam Hussein, who ruled Iraq for decades, had a long and complex relationship. The earlier period of Saddam Hussein's rule, and his relationship with the United States is described in a related case study on the Iran-Iraq War. The Iran-Iraq conflict ended inconclusively in 1988, but Saddam—badly in need of additional oil revenue (Iraq was heavily in debt to various creditors, including Kuwait) and still ambitious to be perceived as the leader of the Arab world—soon launched another military adventure: the attempted conquest and annexation of Kuwait, which he claimed was historically a province of Iraq, in 1990. Within the international community, this invasion was broadly regarded as being unacceptable. A US-led international coalition, operating under United Nations auspices, was organized, and it proceeded to expel Iraq from Kuwait in 1991. From 1990 onward, relations between the United States and the Saddam government would remain very poor.

In the period before the Persian Gulf War (which sometimes is referred to as the First Persian Gulf War), Iraq maintained very active weapon of mass destruction (WMD) programs, building a stockpile of chemical and biological weapons and attempting to construct nuclear warheads. As a condition of the ceasefire between UN forces and Iraq, and for the eventual lifting of sanctions against that country, Baghdad was required to end its WMD programs and surrender any ballistic missiles (except for those of very short range). Iraq was required to allow UN inspectors free access to Iraqi facilities, thus permitting the inspectors to document accurately the dismantling of Iraqi WMD capabilities and uncover any covert efforts to maintain WMD stockpiles.

In the years immediately after 1991, UN inspectors enjoyed relatively free access to Iraq's WMD documents and facilities. However, even in these early days, Iraqi officials frequently interfered with the inspections and tried to curtail the activities of the inspectors. In response to Iraqi intransigence on weapons inspections, the United States and Britain carried out Operation Desert Fox, a short bombing campaign directed against potential Iraqi WMD sites, in December 1998. Notably, a few months earlier, in October, the president had signed the Iraq Liberation Act, a bill providing for support for anti-Saddam Iraqi exile groups and, in essence, making the overthrow of the Ba'ath regime a formal US policy objective.

The United States and Britain (and, for several years, France) enforced "no-fly" zones over the northern (and, later, also the southern) portions of Iraq. Iraqi aircraft were not permitted to operate in these areas because of concerns that they would be used by the Iraqi government to attack Kurds (in the north) and Shi'a (in the south). Both groups had been brutally repressed in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War because they had rebelled against Saddam's rule. Iraq contended that the zones infringed on its sovereignty, and periodically challenged them by attacking aircraft with surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) and anti-aircraft guns or flying Iraqi aircraft in the no-fly zones. In retaliation for these Iraqi actions, SAM sites, radar installations and similar targets were destroyed. These incidents continued regularly throughout the period between the 1991 and 2003 wars.

After the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, the George W. Bush Administration showed a strong desire to overthrow the Saddam regime. Several reasons were stated for this, although particular emphasis was placed on Iraq's suspected WMD programs and ties to international terrorist groups. In regard to the latter, it is clear that the Iraqi government did have connections to various terrorist organizations, although whether Baghdad had any significant operational ties to Al Qaeda—the group which perpetrated the 11 September attacks—still is hotly debated. In any case, however, it is important to note that the Administration explicitly placed Iraq in the wider context of the US-led Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) which had begun with the destruction of the Taliban government of Afghanistan. From this perspective, war in Iraq was not a "stand-alone" effort; rather, it was campaign in a larger struggle which, the Administration warned, could continue for decades.

The Bush Administration also stressed the Iraqi government's brutal repression of its citizens and indicated that if Saddam were overthrown a new, democratic Iraqi government would be created. The possibility of democratic political change in Iraq is intimately connected to another reason and overthrow of the removal of the Ba'ath government: clearly, at least some American officials hoped that the creation of a free Iraq would be a catalyst for broader political change in the Middle East. In the aftermath of the 11 September attacks, many observers had come to see the authoritarianism and related economic underdevelopment prevalent in much of the Middle East as inherently dangerous to the United States. They had concluded that Middle Eastern political and economic conditions created an environment in which terrorist groups were likely to thrive, with angry and disaffected youths turning to Islamist radicalism because of the absence of democratic outlets for political dissent or hope for personal economic and social advancement. It was hoped that a liberated Iraq could serve as a model for other countries in the Middle East. Thus, the removal of the Saddam regime would advance the GWOT in several respects, removing a government which publicly had supported terrorist actions (for example, the Iraqis provided payments to the families of Palestinian suicide bombers), ensuring that Saddam would never be able to make WMD available to terrorists, and laying the foundation for political changes in the Middle East that, over the long term, would address the root causes of terrorism.

In 2002, the United States began to take steps to prepare diplomatically and militarily for an invasion of Iraq. By all appearances, the United States greatly doubted that the UN Security Council (UNSC) would authorize the overthrow of the Saddam regime. This was a realistic perspective, and three veto-holding members of the UNSC (China, France, and Russia) and Hans Blix, the UN chief WMD inspector, consistently worked to avert an invasion of Iraq. In February 2003, US Secretary of State Colin Powell gave a public presentation to the UNSC of evidence indicating that Iraq was constructing WMDs. However, although the Powell presentation likely increased US support for an invasion of Iraq, Washington failed to secure UNSC backing for an invasion. In addition, several key US allies, including Germany, France, and Turkey, refused to support an invasion of Iraq. Importantly, the Turkey refused to allow the United States to launch attacks on Iraq from its territory, a decision which greatly complicated US war planning.

The United States did, however, organize a large group of states—referred to by Washington as a “Coalition of the Willing”—which agreed to participate in or otherwise support an invasion. This included some of the United States’ longtime allies, such as Britain and Italy, as well as newer ones like Poland.

The Overthrow of the Ba’ath Regime

On 20 March 2003, the US-led Coalition launched its war against Iraq with a series of air strikes throughout the country; the air attacks soon were followed by a ground campaign striking from the south. Iraq resistance was ineffectual; indeed, much of the Iraqi Army disintegrated, with troops surrendering upon encountering US troops or simply throwing off their uniforms and fleeing. However, some Iraqi forces did fight, often breaking the laws of war by, for example, pretending to surrender and then firing hidden weapons at approaching Coalition forces. The irregular Fedayeen Saddam militia was particularly known for such tactics, and Fedayeen militiamen melted into the Iraqi population, becoming the nucleus of the Iraqi guerrilla movement in the early months after the fall of the Ba’ath government.

Coalition forces moved rapidly toward Baghdad, and officially conquered the city on 9 April. Many Iraqis celebrated the end of Saddam’s rule, and in a famous scene broadcast worldwide a huge statue of the dictator was toppled by a US military vehicle. Widespread looting and general chaos—exacerbated by the almost complete breakdown of internal policing and (already minimally functional) Iraqi public utilities—began to occur. Soon, criminality began to worsen and as militias formed and violence occurred among various groups of Iraqis, there were concerns that the country could degenerate into civil war.

Many observers were surprised that Saddam’s forces never used chemical and/or biological weapons (CBW) against Coalition troops. Saddam had used chemical weapons against both Iran and Iraqi Kurds in the 1980s, and before the UN-mandated disarmament process began had maintained a very large arsenal of such weapons. In the months after the Ba’ath regime was overthrown, Coalition forces anxiously searched Iraq for CBW, hoping to procure any stockpiles before they fell into the hands of Iraqi insurgents or were removed from the country. However, except for a very modest number of older, degraded munitions left over from the pre-1991 period, no CBW was discovered.

The mystery of Saddam's "disappearing CBW arsenal" remains the subject of much controversy. Many critics of the Bush Administration claim that it grossly exaggerated the evidence for an ongoing Iraqi CBW program and that the absence of a CBW arsenal demonstrates the Administration's deceptiveness in the months before the war. Critics point to evidence such as the "Downing Street Memo," a document, allegedly detailing a meeting of top British officials, which seems to indicate that the British believed that American officials were using intelligence inappropriately to bolster the case for war. The Bush Administration denies acting in bad faith before the war, although it has admitted that a major intelligence failure occurred. Also, Administration defenders point out that most reasonable outside observers—even including the intelligence agencies of several countries opposed to the invasion of Iraq—believed that Saddam was maintaining active WMD programs. Indeed, some analysts even speculate that it is possible that Iraq had a WMD arsenal but that it was removed from the country before the war, most likely to Syria.

There even is some question as to whether Saddam himself fully realized before the war how minimal his WMD programs were. Also, if Saddam did understand that Iraq essentially had been fully disarmed of WMD, one might ask why he continued to take actions that convinced outside observers that it possessed a large arsenal of these weapons. Perhaps Saddam was "bluffing," attempting to deter regional foes such as Iran from attacking Iraq, whose conventional military forces never recovered from the damage inflicted by the 1991 Gulf War and the restrictions on weapons sales which followed the conflict. However, as with so much relating to the Iraqi WMD program, this conclusion remains speculative.

The Counterinsurgency War

In a now-infamous May 2003 speech on the deck of the aircraft carrier *USS Abraham Lincoln*, President Bush—standing in front of a banner reading "mission accomplished"—declared that major combat operations in Iraq had ended. While the exact meaning of the word "major" in this context is debatable, Bush certainly was correct that combat operations against large units of Saddam's army was over; the initial invasion had been concluded rapidly and at an extraordinarily small price in Coalition lives. However, what would turn out to be by far the more difficult and bloody aspect of the Iraq conflict had started. Saddam supporters and Islamist jihadis, many of them foreign, waged

a war of terrorism and guerrilla tactics against the Coalition and the new Iraqi government. In many respects, the situation in Iraq worsened for the United States over time. Restoration of basic services took longer than generally had been anticipated, and the security environment throughout the country, rather than improving consistently, arguably worsened.

The United States only formally occupied Iraq for a short period, with the Coalition Provisional Authority (Iraq's occupation government) dissolving itself on 28 June 2004 and full legal sovereignty being transferred to an entity known as the Iraqi Interim Government. However, this new government was extremely weak and unstable, and clearly relied heavily on the United States for its survival. In 2005, free elections and a referendum approving a new constitution established the basis for a democratic Iraqi government. A new Iraqi Transitional government was formed in May 2005, and finally, in May 2006, Iraq's first "regular" government took office. This process had, however, been an extremely difficult one, with a great deal of political infighting among parties and factions within parties. Perhaps more ominously, it was also clear that Iraq was not smoothly transitioning into a unified country. The ethnic and religious divisions which had shaped Iraqi history profoundly continued to exert a powerful influence on Iraqi politics.

The three largest groups within Iraq are the Kurds (an ethnic, not religious, category—most Kurds are Sunni Muslims) and Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. Over half of Iraqis are Shi'a, about 15-20% of them are Kurdish, and most of the rest are Sunni Arabs (except for about 5% of the population, which is made up of a variety of other groups).¹ Speaking very generally, Kurds are concentrated in the northwestern part of Iraq, Sunnis in the center, particularly along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, and Shi'a in the southeast; the western part of the country has only a small population. However, these groups are intermingled, with some areas, such as the cities of Baghdad and Mosul being particularly tense "flashpoints."

Since the overthrow of Saddam, the consistently least stable area has been the "Sunni triangle"—it is the centre of pro-Saddam sentiment in Iraq, and a hotbed of insurgent activity. Saddam is a Sunni Arab, as were the great majority of his lieutenants,

¹ See the CIA World Factbook 2005, "Iraq," accessed at www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/iz.html.

and his government harshly repressed Shi'as and Kurds in order to cement his rule. The Kurdish-dominated portions of Iraq, in contrast, are perhaps the most stable parts of the country. Under the protection afforded by their militias and the northern "no-fly zone" created after the 1991 Gulf War, Kurds had established a *de facto* independent territory for more than a decade before Saddam was overthrown; thus, this region has relatively well-established governmental and security structures.

The United States faced a daunting task as its occupation of Iraq began. Most important was the small size of the Coalition force in a country that had roughly twenty-five million residents. Further complicating the situation, the Americans essentially decided to dismantle and rebuild Iraq's military and various internal security and police organizations because US leaders wanted to "weed out" any personnel who had committed crimes against the Iraqi population. US occupation troops were stretched thin as they attempted to fight insurgents, police cities and towns, rebuild infrastructure, and undertake the many other tasks necessary to make Iraq a functioning state.

Further complicating matters was the fact that very few American personnel spoke Arabic or had much knowledge of Iraq's history and society. It is difficult enough for troops to occupy a state peopled by individuals speaking the same language and having a very similar culture, but when the occupier and the occupied are very alien to each other, the difficulties of occupation increase mightily. The United States had to rely heavily on Iraqi translators and other locals to assist them in the occupation, but this had its own difficulties—some Iraqi employees were spies for the insurgents, and others were murdered by insurgents for "collaborating" with the Americans.

The United States would encounter numerous unforeseen difficulties during the occupation, including allegations of mistreatment, and even murder, of Iraqis by US troops. Perhaps the most important incident occurred at the Abu Ghraib prison, a large facility near Baghdad which was notorious during the Saddam era; it was used by the US military to house suspected insurgents and their supporters. In late April 2004, US media outlets began to report on allegations that Iraqi prisoners had been abused by American guards at Abu Gharib,² and the events that occurred at the prison soon became a major international

² See "The Struggle for Iraq: Treatment of Prisoners," *New York Times* online ed., 29 April 2004.

scandal that damaged the reputation of the United States and embarrassed the Bush Administration.

During the early months of the insurgency, simply hunting down Saddam Hussein, his sons Qusai and Uday, and other high-priority targets was a key task. Qusai and Uday were killed in a gunfight with US forces in July 2003; Saddam was captured alive by US troops in December 2003. Many observers hoped that the capture of Saddam would so demoralize his supporters that the insurgency would quickly lose momentum and begin to disintegrate. However, this did not occur; indeed, it appears that the insurgency actually worsened during 2004 and 2005.

One of the notable aspects of the Iraq conflict has been the evolution of insurgent tactics. At first, the insurgents tended to utilize relatively simple measures such as sniping and creating very basic improvised explosive devices (IEDs). The latter, which have proven to be one of the greatest threats to Coalition troops, are created from modified devices such as artillery or mortar shells, or made from quantities of a highly explosive material. They are remotely detonated, and Iraqi insurgents have created increasingly sophisticated IEDs, including very effective “shaped” charges with complex triggers. As a result, IEDs have become an increasingly lethal threat to Coalition and Iraqi government personnel.

The security situation in Iraq is complicated by the fact that the country is awash in war material. The Saddam government maintained thousands of stockpiles of weapons and explosives throughout the country, ranging in size from vast depots to small, hidden caches, and during the early months of the occupation a very great quantity of this material disappeared, falling directly into insurgent hands or being funnelled through the black market economy. Moreover, it is clear that weapons—as well as jihadi insurgents—are continuing to filter into the country.

It appears that, at first, most insurgents were Iraqis associated with the Saddam government—Ba’ath party members, military officers, Feydayeen militia, and so forth. As time passed, however, religious fighters unaffiliated with the secular Ba’ath Party, many of them foreign, became increasingly prominent. One of the most important jihadi leaders to emerge was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian who headed a group called Al Qaeda in

Mesopotamia. (As the name indicates, Zarqawi's group was at least loosely associated with Al Qaeda, but it appears that Osama Bin Laden did not have any real control over the organization.) Zarqawi was killed by US troops in June 2006, but both foreign and Iraqi jihadis—who have formed a variety of interconnected groups—continue to undermine Iraqi domestic security.

Over time, the insurgency became yet more complex as various ethnic, political, and sectarian militias became increasingly active, creating a situation in which insurgent activities, revenge killings, and simple crime became increasingly intermingled. Iraqi civilians have suffered greatly, both from indiscriminate insurgent attacks, such as car bombs detonated outside police stations, and from attacks on explicitly civilian targets. These have included attacks by Sunni jihadis on Shi'a religious sites and Shi'a reprisals against Sunni mosques. Throughout Iraq, many individuals who were in a minority group in their home area have fled to towns and neighbourhoods where their group is in the majority. It is widely feared that this intercommunal violence could continue to increase, causing the collapse of the diverse central government and a full-scale ethnic/religious civil war.

In general, there presently is a high level of insecurity throughout most of Iraq, including in Baghdad, which, in addition to being the capital, is by far the largest Iraqi city. However, there also are indications that the new government of Iraq is becoming more stable and capable of self-defence. The size of the reorganized Iraqi military and police forces is increasingly steadily, and (albeit with mixed success) the US military is attempting the turn over more security activities to Iraqis, while the number of US troops in the country is being decreased slowly. While Coalition and Iraqi troops continue to suffer considerable casualties, it is clear that the insurgents themselves are paying a very heavy price. Whether the insurgency will prove sustainable over the long term is uncertain and will depend largely on whether a substantial proportion of the Iraqi population continues to support the insurgents even as they tear the country apart and create a pervasive sense of insecurity. If more and more Iraqis come to reject the insurgency, it—like many insurgencies throughout the world—would lose momentum, perhaps enduring for decades but not preventing the creation of a relatively stable Iraqi government.

Conclusion: The Frustrations of Counterinsurgency

As of this writing, the United States has suffered over 2,500 personnel killed and several times that number wounded and spent hundreds of billions of dollars to secure Iraq, but the Iraqi insurgency continues to endure. The American setbacks in Iraq illustrate well how difficult counterinsurgency can be even for the greatest of powers. The demands for success on the “traditional” battlefield are quite different from those placed on the counterinsurgent, and the contrast between the spectacularly successful initial invasion of Iraq and the hard slog of the counterinsurgency war are stark. Whether the United States will succeed in its initial war aim of creating a stable, democracy is unknown, but, in any case, to a very great degree this is beyond the control of Washington itself. The complex swirl of Iraqi domestic politics, with its old grievances and shifting alliances, has its own logic. The outside superpower cannot fully control these internal factors, but they will be vital in determining the future of Iraq.

Questions

- 1) If the Saddam regime actually had possessed a substantial chemical and biological arsenal, would the American invasion of Iraq have been justified strategically? Explain why or why not Iraqi possession of such weapons would have threatened US vital security interests.
- 2) How might the small number of US troops in Iraq during the early months of the occupation of that country have impacted US counterinsurgency efforts?
- 3) Why might the small number of Arabic speakers in the US military and the relatively small number of US military personnel who are highly knowledgeable about Iraqi culture and similar issues have impacted the US counterinsurgency efforts?
- 4) Why is it that the US military overwhelmed Iraq's regular forces so quickly, yet has had much greater difficulties coping with guerrilla insurgents?
- 5) How have the ethnic and religious divisions in Iraq contributed to the country's instability and fuelled the insurgency?

Websites

www.iraq.net/

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