



Bring Americans Home from Iraq's Endless War

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March 15, 2021

Friday is the 18th anniversary of George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq. That misadventure proved to be a humanitarian catastrophe. As well as Washington's worst geopolitical blunder in four decades. Tragically, America's involvement is the misbegotten gift that keeps on giving – and killing.

President Joe Biden should bring America's troops home from Iraq. Now.

In 2000 candidate Bush advocated a "humble" foreign policy. However, less than eight months after he took office the 9/11 attacks transformed the U.S. and its role in the world. Two decades later Americans are still paying the price for Bush's bloody blunders.

He unaccountably turned administration policy over to a coterie of Neoconservatives with grand ambitions. They saw al-Qaeda's attack, prompted by America's constant and constantly maladroit political and military intervention in the Middle East, as an excuse for promiscuous war-making. Despite the disastrous consequences, this approach continues to dominate US foreign policy.

First came Bush's attack on Afghanistan, widely applauded for targeting the terrorists as well as the Taliban, which had hosted al-Qaeda. However, his administration turned the mission into a misguided attempt at nation-building, with Americans on station two decades later attempting to create a centralized government and Western-style democracy in Kabul. Biden now is debating whether to withdraw US forces in compliance with the Trump administration's agreement with the Taliban.

Next the Bush administration invaded Iraq, even though there was no evidence of Iraqi involvement in 9/11. The claimed meeting between al-Qaeda and Iraqi operatives never happened. United Nations inspections turned up no weapons of mass destruction. The celebrated informant "Curveball" – provided by CIA-asset Ahmed Chalabi, who pushed for war in hopes of taking power atop a US tank – lied shamelessly. Just about every other administration justification for the planned invasion was equally false.

No matter. The Neocons wanted war. The Neocons got war. Fought and paid by everyone else.

The expense has been extraordinary. In November 2019 Neta Crawford of the Watson Institute at Brown University estimated that all the conflicts triggered by 9/11 will ultimately cost at least \$6.4 trillion. Last year she attributed \$2 trillion to Iraq alone. This extravagant waste looks even

more foolish today, with the US facing massive deficits, a staggering national debt, and an ever-bleaker fiscal future as the population ages.

Worse, though, is the human cost of the Iraq war. Some 8,700 US and allied troops and contractors were killed. Thankfully, better battlefield medicine saved many lives that would have been lost in Vietnam. However, that left tens of thousands of wounded, many with permanent disabilities.

Although Americans focus on their own when counting casualties, far more Iraqis died as a result of Washington's invasion. The lowest estimate of dead runs 110,000, but dates to 2009. The authoritative Iraq Body Count lists the number officially recognized – "documented," in IBC-parlance – as between 185,593 and 208,667. (The count continues to march upward, but thankfully less swiftly than in the past.)

However, IBC acknowledged that many murders went unrecorded. In a sectarian urban conflict warring groups rarely bury, let alone document, their victims. IBC suggested that doubling its estimate would yield a more accurate number, though still not reliable. Surveys employing respected methodology yielded substantially higher results. One estimate, which counted through mid-2011, came in at 461,000. Another assessment, conducted in 2007, ran an astonishing (and much debated) 1,033,000. A 2018 update of earlier research to include ISIS-era violence, which would not have occurred but for the invasion, generated a range from 1.5 to 3.4 million dead, with around 2.4 million deemed most likely.

The only certainty is that the US invasion ravaged untold Iraqi families and communities. The number of wounded must be in the hundreds of thousands or millions. Millions more people were displaced. As of 2007 some two million Iraqis had been forced from their homes, with many going to Kurdistan or elsewhere in Iraq while others fled overseas, mostly to Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. The latter later suffered its own civil war, turning into another national charnel house for religious minorities. Over time many Iraqis returned home, but found their houses occupied, neighborhoods controlled by hostile militias, and nation bedeviled by unstable, sectarian politics. The 2014 Islamic State offensive and ensuing conflict generated another human tsunami, of perhaps 3.3 million Iraqis.

Journalist Nabil Salih recently wrote of his homeland: "Eighteen years have passed, and yet Baghdad still feels like it is amidst a war. Military helicopters still roar over impoverished alleys where youth are doomed to a miserable existence, to go out looking for work only to return home in a coffin, to have their portraits adorn living rooms where old women sit in silence, drowned in unassuaged grief." About a fifth of all Iraqis, some 6.7 million at the end of 2019, rely on humanitarian assistance.

The geopolitical consequences of the Iraq invasion also were horrid. Iran, the beta noire of US foreign policy for decades, was empowered, an ironic result given Washington's destructive obsession with Tehran and continuing campaign against Iran's nuclear program, regional aggressiveness, and Islamist regime. Al-Qaeda in Iraq arose, reviving a franchise that had been badly damaged by the ouster of the Taliban. This group mutated into the Islamic State, which delivered even greater murder and mayhem throughout Iraq and Syria. Although ISIS lost the territory it once controlled, it remains a political and theological force, with thousands of still loyal fighters.

Incredibly, Americans are still on station – and vulnerable – in Iraq as Bush’s calamitous invasion approaches its 18th anniversary. US bases, along with the embassy, have come under regular missile attack. Last year an embarrassed Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who usually played the swaggering lout when addressing Iraq and Iran, announced that he might close the embassy in Baghdad if attacks did not cease.

Why is America still entangled in Iraq?

Washington’s inveterate hawks blamed Baghdad’s near implosion in 2014 on Barack Obama for withdrawing American forces. However, he had little choice but to follow Bush’s exit plan because Iraq’s parliament refused to approve a status of forces agreement to govern a continuing US presence. Nor would maintaining a small garrison have changed events. A few Americans would have done nothing to repair Iraqi politics while becoming targets of extremists on both sides.

Ultimately, the responsibility for Iraq’s future lies with Baghdad. The rise of the Islamic State and Iranian-backed militias reflects Iraq’s fractured politics and maladroit governance. These problems would remain even if US forces stayed. Only the Iraqis can defuse their nation’s seemingly endless conflict by addressing grievances and solving problems.

President Donald Trump talked of leaving but decided to use Washington’s military presence in Iran’s neighbor as part of his disastrous "maximum pressure" campaign against Tehran. The latter proved to be folly, with Iran moving much closer to developing a nuclear weapon. Tehran treated Americans in Iraq as easy targets to pressure Washington. As the Biden administration appears to understand, only renewed diplomacy can yield a reasonable *modus vivendi* with Iran.

The only plausible argument, then, for a continuing US presence is ISIS, whose fighters remain active. However, the Iraqi armed forces have improved significantly since the disastrous days of 2014 and are backed by Shia militias, which proved effective in earlier battles. Moreover, virtually every other Mideast government has an incentive to help Iraq combat the Islamic State. Even the Saudis and Emiratis might stop killing Yemeni civilians long enough to assist Baghdad against a renewed outbreak.

Last year Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi offered another rationale, declaring: "We definitely don’t need combat troops in Iraq, but we do need training and capacity enhancement and security cooperation." However, that role should decrease as Iraqi military competence improves. Better yet, Europeans should take over all training, since US personnel have performed most combat duties for years, Washington should depart, leaving any residual duties to others.

Alas, Americans are still on duty. Yet the Kadhimi government has proved unable to protect American forces, despite its desire to tame the militias. Indeed, many officials would prefer that the US remain to guard against an Islamic State revival and limit the influence of Tehran as well as Iranian-backed paramilitary groups. However, there is strong popular opposition to Washington’s presence. And Tehran next door necessarily looms large. Acknowledged Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein: "The influence of Iran is there. This is part of the reality."

Nor has the US been able to protect those it has put in harm’s way. Neither threats nor retaliation, the latest by the Biden administration a couple weeks ago, have halted attacks by aggressive Iranian-backed militias. Indeed, the Biden bombing – on Syrian territory, illegally

occupied by the US – appeared to be a political rather than military effort, designed to look serious without doing real damage which might exacerbate tensions. Even the target was suspect. Reported the *New York Times*: "Little is known about the group, including whether it is backed by Iran or related to the organizations that used the facilities the American air strikes targeted on Thursday. Some American officials contend that the group is merely a front for one of the better-known Shia militias."

Washington has the firepower for far more serious action, but religiously driven militias still might be willing to trade lives for additional pressure on the US. No American troops have yet been killed, but that appears to be mostly luck (a contractor died of a heart attack during the March barrage). The casualty rate could be much worse in the future, especially if augmented by heavier Iranian missiles.

Threats against Tehran also falter in the absence of evidence that Iran orchestrated recent assaults. Last fall it pressed its Iraqi allies to eschew attacks on Americans to avoid creating an incident that could be exploited by President Donald Trump. After the election Tehran is believed to have promoted calm to encourage revival of the JCPOA, or nuclear deal. In such circumstances speedily moving back into compliance with the nuclear accord would be Washington's best strategy, other than leaving, to foreclose Iranian-inspired attacks.

In any case, Tehran's degree of control over the Iraqi groups it supports is unclear, especially after the death of Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani, who had forged a close relationship with them. Iraqi militias have their own agendas. The groups want US forces to withdraw and desire revenge for the Trump administration's assassination last year of several Iraqis, including Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, head of the Kata'ib Militia, alongside Soleimani.

On March 1st several paramilitaries announced the end of an informal ceasefire. They retaliated after the administration bombing raid, prompting the Pentagon to indicate it was considering its options. Several groups then said they would halt their attacks if the Iraqi government ordered Washington to withdraw its forces within 12 months. No word from Baghdad, but this would offer a face-saving out for the US. Americans will be inviting targets as long as they are in Iraq.

Bush recklessly destroyed Iraq and destabilized the Middle East, dragging Americans into two decades of war. However, neither country nor region matter as much as before. Moreover, diplomacy, particularly expanding Washington's reopening with Iran, offers better hope of transforming the Mideast, and doing so peacefully. Biden should withdraw US forces from Iraq and allow Americans to finally embrace peace after a generation of needless war.

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