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Opinion

The Iraq war: still a massive mistake

The Iraq war is now being declared a success by some who point to recent progress. But the March 7 elections won't change the tremendous cost in lives, money, US image, and geopolitics.

By Malou Innocent / April 5, 2010

Washington

There's a growing narrative that Iraq's solidifying democracy makes the seven years of US war and occupation a worthy enterprise.

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Some observers have even spun Iraq's March 7 elections as proof that democracy promotion via military occupation can succeed. Don't believe the hype. The Iraq war remains a mistake of mammoth proportions. And Iraq's election represents a pyrrhic victory, as the economic, political, and moral costs of the occupation far outweigh any benefits.

First are the sacrifices in terms of blood and treasure. The broad consensus is that the war has cost the US economy well over \$700 billion – with the meter still running. The Iraq war has also left nearly 4,400 American troops dead, more than 31,000 physically disabled, and countless more psychologically traumatized.

According to most estimates, more than 100,000 Iraqis have been killed since the invasion. More than 2 million displaced Iraqi Sunnis, who fled into neighboring Jordan and Syria, are adding instability to an already politically precarious region of the world.

The war also upset the regional balance of power, as it substantially strengthened Iran's influence in Iraq and severely limited US policy options toward Tehran's clerical regime. No amount of prewar planning or "boots on the ground" could have prevented the Islamic Republic's political push into a neighboring country with a 60 percent Shiite majority. The removal of Saddam Hussein as the principal strategic counterweight to Iran paved the way for the expansion of Iranian influence in Iraq, and has enabled Tehran to back, with far greater impunity, its political allies in Baghdad.

Even before 9/11, Iran possessed a budding nuclear program, the region's largest population, an expansive ballistic-missile arsenal, and significant influence over the Lebanese Shiite group Hezbollah. By adding to that list enhanced political influence in Iraq, Iran can be somewhat more assertive geopolitically in the region, further limiting US policy options.

A third side effect of the war waged purportedly in democracy's name is that it came at the expense of America's already frayed reputation in the Muslim world. Far from being seen as a benevolent liberator, the United States was perceived as a blundering behemoth – and an abusive, hypocritical one to boot.

People of the region are well aware of Washington's policies toward Iraq in the decades preceding 9/11. Policymakers tacitly supported the Baath Party's suppression of the Iraqi Communist Party in 1963, and helped restore the Baathists to power after a takeover by pro-Nasser Arab nationalists in 1968. From 1980 to 1988, during the Iran-Iraq War, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency gave Hussein battle-planning assistance, satellite imagery, tactical planning for airstrikes, and information on Iranian

deployments.

As The Economist detailed last fall, torture became routine under the US-supported Maliki regime. Hussein-era tactics of censorship are also reemerging. The government announced plans to censor imported books and the Internet, and rescind the protective anonymity of e-mailers and bloggers. These repressive policies are quite similar to those imposed by yet another US-supported dictator in the region: Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. As modern-day Egypt and now Iraq demonstrate, countries with procedural elections yet devoid of liberal norms can merely be Potemkin villages masquerading as democracies.

A fourth consequence of the war in Iraq – and one that should determine whether it is deemed a “success” – is that it did little to keep America safe from Al Qaeda, the perpetrators of 9/11. In this respect, what makes “Bush’s war” in Iraq arguably one of the biggest strategic blunders in US history is not just the litany of failures it caused but the opportunities America lost. The disaster in Iraq diverted badly needed intelligence assets, public attention, and congressional oversight from the forgotten war in Afghanistan.

Maybe that’s why two GOP members of Congress who recently visited the Cato Institute in Washington revealed that most Republicans on the Hill now believe the Iraq war was a mistake. They also said that “more than half the Republican caucus” believes the way the US began the Afghanistan war was a mistake. Today, polls show that most Americans say the invasion of Iraq was a “mistake” and “not worth it.”

As defenders try to argue that the war was justified, the most important lesson we must take away is not that more troops, better tactics, and improved cooperation can produce success the next time around. Rather, it is that wars have the potential to expose the limits of military power and armed interventions should be undertaken only when absolutely critical to a nation’s security.

Seven years later, let’s hope Americans have learned the right lessons. Let’s hope, too, that fortunes in the Middle East will turn for the better, not just for the US and its tarnished prestige, but for the millions of innocent civilians uprooted by conflict.

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