

THE US WAR ON IRAQ: NEVER FORGIVE NEVER FORGET

Within Iraq, US-led forces toppled the central Iraqi government within the first three weeks. By actively exacerbating divisions between Shiites and Sunnis, Arabs and Kurds, the US succeeded in prompting a civil war that has ravaged the country and balkanized the region. The US occupiers disbanded the existing Iraqi army and police and banned senior ruling party Ba'ath members from employment, leading to mass insurgencies that quickly got out of US control and directly created ISIS. The American scheme to exercise its hold over Iraq — aided by its client states in the Middle East — has led to tremendous destabilization in the vast region stretching from South Asia to North Africa, spawning fundamentalist terrorist groups, creating the conditions for regional proxy wars between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and paving the way for the US's permanent military presence in the region. In the process, thousands upon thousands of people have been uprooted from their homes, creating a catastrophic refugee crisis. US troops have also paid a heavy price: more than 5,000 have been killed in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past 17 years, and an even greater number of American veterans — more than 8,000 — have committed suicide during this time.

The post-invasion regime the US installed consisted of Iraqi exiles flown into Iraq on the heels of the US-led invasion. This new government was to be built on a neoliberal agenda in defiance of popular resistance against privatization. State management of oil and gas was to be replaced with an open door for multinational corporations to exploit Iraq's resources, which would ensure that profits from oil exports lead to no public investment in the reconstruction and well-being of the popular classes, but instead enrich the Iraqi elite and multinational companies.

Iraqis continue to resist the sustained efforts by foreign players to keep the people of Iraq from exercising sovereignty over their natural resources and their economy. While the Trump administration promised to bring the troops home, several thousand American troops are still stationed in Iraq, and the US continues its efforts to grab as much Iraqi oil as possible.

The neo-conservative clique in George W. Bush's administration played an important role in prompting the invasion of Iraq, but the war in Iraq must not be reduced to the policy decisions of one presidential administration. Instead, it needs to be seen in light of the broader history of American empire, which has resorted to more and more brutal means of asserting its hegemony in recent decades amidst the general conditions of neoliberal global financialization as a response to economic stagnation since the 1970s, declining US hegemony, and a renewed global scramble for control over natural resources. Particularly since the Second World War, American empire, like the preceding colonial empires, has sought to ward off every attempt by peripheral countries to pursue autonomous development or to even secure a better deal for themselves under imperialist domination, keeping them firmly locked into dependence. Imperialist wars of destruction de-industrialize and de-develop; they uproot people, dismantle social infrastructure, and preclude subject states from exercising political and economic sovereignty and pursuing policies oriented to the well-being of popular classes; and they empower regional comprador classes that pursue austerity under the decree of international financial institutions, producing poverty and unemployment. These are indeed some of the ways in which Iraqis continue to endure enormous suffering engendered directly or indirectly by US imperialist wrath.

On March 19, 2003, Baghdad, Iraq's capital, was rocked with thunderous explosions as Tomahawk cruise missiles launched by the US army rained down death and destruction on the oil-rich country. This was the beginning of the illegal invasion of Iraq, launched by the Bush Administration to "free its people" from the tyranny of Saddam Hussein and bestow them with the gift of democracy.

The subsequent war and US occupation of Iraq brought sheer devastation and human suffering, killing 1 million Iraqis and displacing 3.7 million within the first 4 years. What was touted as a quick "twenty-first century" war fought with "smart" weapons has turned out to be an overdrawn nightmare for the whole region, destroying hundreds of thousands of human lives, dismantling basic political institutions and social infrastructure, and turning entire cities into rubble and smoke. Deployment of thousands of tons of munitions and fatal chemicals by the US has yielded environmental devastation, saturating the air, soil, and water with lead and mercury, which continue to gag, maim, and kill Iraqis. The horrors of the United States' merciless destruction of Iraq over the past three decades from the Gulf War and sanctions to the invasion and occupation belong to some of the most vicious recent episodes of US imperialism's blood-soaked track record.

In a much-remembered battle of 2004, the US-led coalition forces besieged the Iraqi town of Fallujah, an insurgents' stronghold, and razed much of the city through intense shelling and airstrikes. They then bulldozed all the rubble to the banks of the Euphrates River, the city's source of drinking water. While the US national media zealously cheered the marines' heroism, hundreds of Iraqis were massacred, forcibly denied medical treatment, and bombarded with white phosphorus, an inflammable weapon that melts the human flesh down to the bone — all in gross violation of international law. The US military denied its use of white phosphorus on Iraqi civilians as a chemical weapon of war before being forced to admit it due to media exposure. An epidemic of birth defects erupted in Fallujah after the battle, as metals such as depleted uranium accumulate in the body tissue of those who are exposed to it and distort fetal development. According to Christopher Busby, the Scientific Secretary of the European Committee on Radiation Risk, Fallujah displays "the highest rate of genetic damage in any population every studied."

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Indeed, all across Iraq, US bombings and the extensive use of depleted uranium have led to a dramatic spike in cancer (particularly among children), brain tumors, high rates of infant mortality, and an increase in miscarriages. Hundreds of babies are now born with severe congenital deformities – with one eye or two heads, paralysis, tumors, and grotesquely malformed bones which make impossible or extremely painful the functioning of bare life. These are some of the fruits of American empire's world-historical fight for freedom and democracy. For many generations to come, the bodies of Iraqis will continue to bear witness to the viciousness of the US's imperialist venture in Iraq.

Home to one of the earliest civilizations, Iraq has been subject to imperial conquest for most of its recent history. After the First World War, German and Ottoman colonies were divided up among the victors and Iraq was "awarded" to Britain, which suppressed popular revolts against its rule through air bombings. A puppet ruler was installed who gave away a huge concession for exploiting Iraq's oil to the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC) operated by Western oil companies (their profits from Iraq amounted to \$322.9 million in 1963 alone).

In July 1958, the British-backed anti-communist monarchical regime was overthrown by the Free Officers' Movement led by Abdel Karim Qasim, whose nationalist stance elicited threats of invasion from US and Britain. Qasim was overthrown in a coup led by the Ba'ath Party with help from the CIA, which paved the way for Saddam Hussein's rise to power. In 1972, the IPC was nationalized; high oil revenues were invested in welfare expenditures, infrastructural projects, and improved living standards. In 1979, Hussein effectively became the leader of Iraq and continued to pursue a massive military build-up. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 transformed the balance of power in the whole region, ousting the US client regime of the Shah that was vital to US military dominance over the Persian Gulf. Iraq's invasion of Iran in 1980 allowed US imperialism to recover its increasingly precarious hold over the region.

The US and its allies fully supported Iraq's war against Iran (1980-1988), supplying Saddam Hussein with loans, helicopters, and chemical weapons to gas thousands of Kurds and Iranians. When the war ended, Hussein was left with a fledgling economy and expected Western powers and their client gulf states to help with Iraq's reconstruction for his services against Iran. This help did not arrive, and so Hussein invaded Kuwait to seize control of its oil production, which provided just the pretext for the US to expand its military hold over Iraq. The US shot down all attempts at a diplomatic solution, admitting in fact that for US's own strategic interests in the region, a peaceful Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait would be a "nightmare scenario." With the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was no restraint now on US's relentless pursuit of global hegemony – for which direct control over Western Asian oil was necessary.

The result was the disastrous Gulf War (1990-1991), precursor to the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. A US-led aerial bombing campaign, the most brutal since Vietnam, dropped 84,200 tons of bombs in 43 days of war, frequently in heavily populated residential areas and other harmless sites, while the US military consistently lied to the public about its bombing raids being "surgical strikes" aimed at purely military targets. More than 15,000 Iraqi civilians died directly due to allied bombing and between 100,000 and 200,000 Iraqi soldiers were killed – thousands set on fire with incendiary napalm bombs never broadcast on US televisions and thousands buried alive as US tanks equipped with bulldozers rolled over trenches holding ill-fed and ill-equipped Iraqi soldiers. Moreover, the US-led alliance carried out a systematic and deliberate destruction of Iraq's civilian infrastructure, targeting water and sanitation facilities, communication and electricity generation. In the characteristic American tradition of historical amnesia and fake news, the US today shamelessly blames Iraqis for the ongoing social crisis, denying its own role in the criminal ravaging of the country.

The genocidal sanctions slapped onto Iraq after the war for the subsequent thirteen years (1990-2003) ensured the impossibility of post-war reconstruction, strangling and massively shrinking Iraq's economy. Under the sanctions, Iraq was barred from exploiting its oil reserves. The US prevented the import of items needed to restore medical facilities, water supply, electric power, and sanitation. Children perished from exposure to depleted uranium, deployed by the US for the first time during the Gulf War, as medical treatment supplies were blocked from entering Iraq. A 1997 UNICEF report placed the overall toll from the sanctions to be at 1.2 million human lives, prompting even the UN humanitarian coordinator in Iraq, Denis Halliday, to resign in protest against the sanctions, which he termed deliberate "genocide."

In 1996, when asked if killing half a million Iraqi children through economic sanctions was worthwhile, the then US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright replied: "we think the price is worth it."

Thus, the decision to occupy Iraq had been in the making for many years before 9/11, which the Bush administration bizarrely linked to Saddam Hussein. While the real motives for the war have to do with Iraq's vast oil reserves and establishing US hegemony in the Middle East, a massive fear-mongering propaganda campaign was orchestrated to sell the war to the American public as one for the protection of Iraqis and Americans from Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction, which were never found. On multiple occasions, President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell brazenly and falsely declared to the public that the CIA knew of Iraqi sites storing chemical and biological weapons. The Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, chaired by Joe Biden, whipped up complete lies about Saddam Hussein's links with Al-Qaeda and pushed for war.

A whole web of lies churned out by the State Department, the CIA, and the Pentagon was willingly amplified and recycled by the American media. The most privatized war in US history up until that point, the Iraq war sent more than a hundred billion dollars of taxpayer money into the coffers of private contractors in charge of maintenance, training, mercenary, and other operations. Further, the state took the opportunity offered by post-9/11 jingoistic hysteria to implement an unprecedented expansion of mass-surveillance, particularly targeting Arab and Muslim communities, and propelled racist war-mongering and Islamophobia.

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