The Iraq War: A Concise History

Prelude to war

The Iran–Iraq War was a protracted armed conflict that began on September 22, 1980 when Iraq invaded neighboring Iran. The war lasted almost eight years, ending in a stalemate on August 20, 1988 when Iran accepted the UN-brokered ceasefire. Iraq's rationale for the invasion was to cripple Iran and prevent Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini from exporting the 1979 Iranian Revolution movement to Shi'a-majority Iraq and threaten the Sunni-dominated Ba'athist leadership. During the war, the West and the Soviet Union regarded Iraq as a counterbalance to post-revolutionary Iran. Following Iran’s success in repelling the Iraqi invasion and Khomeini's refusal to end the war in 1982, the United States reached out to Iraq, beginning with the restoration of diplomatic relations in 1984. The United States wished to protect the oil-producing Gulf States, some of whom have large Shi'ite populations, from following Iran’s lead. As a result, the U.S. began to support Iraq via technological aid, intelligence, the sale of chemical and biological warfare technology and military equipment, and satellite intelligence. American official ambiguity towards which side to support was summed up by Henry Kissinger when he remarked, "It's a pity they both can't lose." The Americans and the British blocked or watered down UN resolutions that condemned Iraq for using chemical weapons against the Iranians and their own Kurdish citizens. Heavily indebted to Kuwait and the Saudis as a result of the war, the Iraqis ask for loan forgiveness and are refused. This refusal, along disputes over oil pricing, production, and former colonial borders led Iraq to invade Kuwait in August 1990.

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait ended in Iraq’s defeat by a U.S.-led coalition in the Persian Gulf War (1990–91). To restrain future Iraqi aggression, the United Nations (UN) implemented economic sanctions against Iraq in order to, among other things, hinder the progress of its most lethal arms programs, including those for the development of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons, which the U.S. had previously supported. UN inspections during the mid-1990s uncovered a variety of proscribed weapons and prohibited technology throughout Iraq. In 1994 UNSCOM destroys Iraq's known chemical weapons and neutralizes Iraq's nuclear program. In 1998 a U.S. air raid on Iraqi military targets U.S. (Operation Desert Fox) destroys Iraq's WMD infrastructure.

In 2002 the new U.S. president, George W. Bush, argued that the vulnerability of the United States following the September 11 attacks of 2001, combined with Iraq’s alleged continued possession and manufacture of weapons of mass destruction and its support for terrorist groups which, according to the Bush administration, included al-Qaeda, the perpetrators of the September 11 attacks - accusations later proven baseless - made disarming Iraq a renewed priority. UN Security Council Resolution 1441, passed on November 8, 2002, demanded that Iraq readmit inspectors and that it comply with all previous resolutions. Iraq appeared to comply with the resolution, but in early 2003 President Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair declared that Iraq was actually continuing to hinder UN inspections and that it still retained proscribed weapons. German and French leaders sought to extend inspections and give Iraq more time to comply with them. However, on March 17, seeking no further UN resolutions and deeming further diplomatic efforts by the Security Council futile, Bush declared an end to diplomacy and issued an ultimatum to Šaddām Hussein,
giving the Iraqi president 48 hours to leave Iraq. The leaders of France, Germany, Russia, and other countries objected to this buildup toward war.

The 2003 conflict

When ṣaddām refused to leave Iraq, U.S. and allied forces launched air attacks on the morning of March 20. Despite fears that Iraqi forces would engage in a scorched-earth policy—destroying bridges and dams and setting fire to Iraq’s southern oil wells—little damage was done by retreating Iraqi forces; in fact, large numbers of Iraqi troops simply chose not to resist the advance of coalition forces. In southern Iraq the greatest resistance to U.S. forces as they advanced northward was from irregular groups of Baʿth Party supporters, known as Fedayeen, paramilitary and irregular fighters.

U.S. aircraft inflicted heavy damage on Republican Guard units around the capital. On April 4 U.S. forces took control of Baghdad’s international airport. Iraqi resistance, though at times vigorous, was disorganized, and over the next several days Army and Marine Corps units staged raids into the heart of the city. On April 9 resistance in Baghdad collapsed, and U.S. soldiers took control of the city. Isolated groups of regime loyalists continued to fight, but the U.S. president declared an end to major combat on May 1. ṣaddām Husseīn was captured on December 13, 2003, and was turned over to Iraqi authorities in June 2004 to stand trial for various crimes; he was subsequently convicted of crimes against humanity and was hung on December 30, 2006.

Occupation and continued warfare

Following the collapse of the Baʿthist regime, Iraq’s major cities erupted in a wave of looting that was directed mostly at government offices and other public institutions, and there were severe outbreaks of violence - both common criminal violence and acts of reprisal against the former ruling clique. Restoring law and order was one of the most arduous tasks for the occupying forces, one that was exacerbated by continued attacks against occupying troops that soon developed into full-scale guerrilla warfare; increasingly, the conflict came to be identified as a civil war, although the Bush administration generally avoided using that term and instead preferred the label “sectarian violence.” Coalition casualties had been light in the initial 2003 combat, with about 150 deaths by May 1. However, deaths of U.S. troops soared thereafter, reaching some 1,000 by the time of the U.S. presidential election in November 2004 and surpassing 3,000 in early 2007; in addition, several hundred soldiers from other coalition countries have been killed. The number of Iraqis who died during the conflict is uncertain. One estimate made in late 2006 put the total at more than 650,000 between the U.S.-led invasion and October 2006, but many other reported estimates put the figures for the same period at about 40,000 to 50,000.

After 35 years of Baʿthist rule that included three major wars and a dozen years of economic sanctions, the economy was in shambles and only slowly began to recover. Moreover, the country remained saddled with a ponderous debt that vastly exceeded its annual gross domestic product, and oil production, the country’s single greatest source of revenue, was badly hobbled. The continuing guerrilla assaults on occupying forces and leaders of the new Iraqi government in the years after the war only compounded the difficulty of rebuilding Iraq.

In the Shiʿite regions of southern Iraq, many of the local religious leaders (ayatollahs) who had fled ṣaddām’s regime returned to the country, and Shiʿites from throughout the world were able to resume the pilgrimage to the holy cities of Al-Najaf and Karbalāʾ that had been banned under ṣaddām. The sectarian violence that engulfed the country caused enormous chaos, with brutal killings by rival Shiʿite and Sunni militias. One such Shiʿite militia group,
the Mahdi Army, formed by cleric Muqtadā al-ṣadr in the summer of 2003, was particularly deadly in its battle against Sunnis and U.S. and Iraqi forces.

A controversial war

Unlike the general consensus achieved in the Persian Gulf War, no broad coalition was assembled to remove saddām and his Baʿth Party from power. Although some European leaders voiced their conditional support for the war and none regretted the end of the violent Baʿthist regime, public opinion in Europe and the Middle East was overwhelmingly against the war. Many in the Middle East saw it as a new brand of anti-Arab and anti-Islamic imperialism, and most Arab leaders decried the occupation of a fellow Arab country by foreign troops. Reaction to the war was mixed in the United States. Though several antiwar protests occurred in American cities in the lead-up to the invasion, many opinion polls showed considerable support for military action against Iraq before and during the war. Surprisingly, American opinions on the war sometimes crossed traditional party lines, with many to the right of the avowedly conservative Bush seeing the war as an act of reckless internationalism and some to the political left, appalled by the Baʿthist regime’s brutal human rights violations and its consistent aggression, giving grudging support to military action.

As violence continued and casualties mounted, however, more Americans (including some who had initially supported the war) began to criticize the Bush administration for what they perceived to be the mishandling of the occupation of Iraq. The appearance in the news of photographs of U.S. soldiers abusing Iraqis at Abu Ghraib prison west of Baghdad, a facility notorious for brutality under the Baʿth regime, further damaged world opinion of the United States. In addition, a U.S. bipartisan commission formed to investigate the September 11 attacks reported in July 2004 that there was no evidence of a “collaborative operational relationship” between the Baʿthist government and al-Qaeda—a direct contradiction to one of the U.S. government’s main justifications for the war.

Bush’s prewar claims, the failure of U.S. intelligence services to correctly gauge Iraq’s weapon-making capacity, and the failure to find any weapons of mass destruction—the Bush administration’s primary rationale for going to war—became major political debating points. The war was a central issue in the 2004 U.S. presidential election, which Bush only narrowly won. Opposition to the war continued to increase over the next several years; soon only a dwindling minority of Americans believed that the initial decision to go to war in 2003 was the right one, and an even smaller number still supported the administration’s handling of the situation in Iraq.

In late 2006 the Iraq Study Group, an independent bipartisan panel co-chaired by former U.S. secretary of state James A. Baker III and former U.S. Congressman Lee Hamilton, issued a report that found the situation in Iraq to be “grave and deteriorating.” The report advocated region-wide diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict and called for the U.S. military role to evolve into one that provided diminishing support for an Iraqi government that the report challenged to assume more responsibility for the country’s security.

The surge

There was considerable debate within the administration over the path forward in Iraq prior to the release of the Iraq Study Group report. In January 2007, President Bush announced a controversial plan to temporarily increase the number of U.S. troops there by more than 20,000, an effort that became known as the surge. Despite heavy casualties initially—2007 was the deadliest year for U.S. forces since 2004—a subsequent drop in violence was a source of encouragement, and a number of the additional troops were subsequently
withdrawn. The ultimate success of the surge itself remained a source of continuing debate, however, as the declining levels of violence observed in 2007 were attributed not solely to the surge but to a convergence of several factors. Among these were a change in tactics that brought U.S. forces already on the ground more in line with classic counterinsurgency strategy; the Sunni Awakening, a movement in which Sunni tribesmen who had formerly fought against U.S. troops eventually realigned themselves to help counter other insurgents, particularly those affiliated with al-Qaeda; and the voluntary peace observed by Sadr and his forces beginning in August of that year.

In November 2008 the Iraqi parliament approved a U.S.-Iraqi agreement that redefined the legal framework for U.S. military activity in Iraq and set a timetable for the final withdrawal of U.S. forces. Under the agreement, which was signed during the final months of the Bush administration after nearly a year of negotiation, U.S. troops were scheduled to leave the cities by mid-2009, and withdrawal from the country was set to be completed by December 31, 2011. In February 2009 newly elected President Barack Obama announced that U.S. combat forces would be withdrawn from Iraq by August 31, 2010, with the remaining troops due to pull out by the end of 2011. On August 18, 2010—two weeks ahead of schedule—the last combat brigade withdrew from Iraq; 50,000 U.S. soldiers remained in Iraq to act as a transitional force.

Denouement

In contrast to publicly known U.S. military casualty figures (tracked by the Pentagon to more than 4,300 in October 2009), for a number of years no comprehensive data on Iraqi mortality was made available by the Iraqi government. In October 2009 the Iraqi government released its estimate of violent deaths for the 2004–2008 period (statistics for the earliest portion of the war were far more difficult to obtain, due to the lack of a functioning government at that time). According to the government estimate, more than 85,000 Iraqis—a figure that included both civilians and military personnel—had died violently in the four-year period.

In October 2010 the whistle-blowing organization WikiLeaks published nearly 400,000 secret U.S. military documents from the Iraq War online under the title "Iraq War Log," following the release of a similar cache of documents related to the Afghanistan War in July 2010. WikiLeaks made the documents available to several major news outlets, including The New York Times, Der Spiegel, Le Monde, The Guardian, and Al-Jazeera ahead of the publication date, stipulating that the material had to remain under embargo until the online release. The documents, mostly raw tactical and intelligence reports generated by field units in Iraq between 2004 and 2009, did not radically change the public understanding of the war, but they did reveal detailed information about its day-to-day conduct. They indicated that U.S. forces kept more detailed counts of Iraqi civilian casualties than previously acknowledged and that these counts indicated higher rates of civilian casualties than the military’s public statements, that private military contractors were often involved in incidents of excessive force, that Iran provided extensive direct military aid to Shi’ite militias participating in Iraq’s sectarian conflict, and that U.S. forces ignored the widespread use of torture by Iraqi security forces. U.S. and Iraqi officials condemned the publication of the documents, saying that the release would set back security efforts and endanger the lives of military personnel and Iraqis who cooperated with the military.

In July 2011, U.S. military officials announced that Iraq and the United States had begun negotiations to keep several thousand U.S. soldiers in Iraq past December 31, 2011, the date for withdrawal set in negotiations in 2008. However, a possible extension of the U.S. presence in Iraq remained unpopular with the Iraqi public and with several Iraqi political factions. Negotiations failed when the two sides were unable to reach an agreement over
the continuation for U.S. troops of legal immunity from Iraqi law. In October, President Obama announced that the remaining 39,000 soldiers would leave the country at the end of 2011. The U.S. military formally declared the end of its mission in Iraq in a ceremony in Baghdad on December 15, as the final U.S. troops prepared to withdraw from the country.*

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