

Iraq

American intervention in Iraq has led to a great deal of controversy, however, it is all too easy to forget that Iraq has been a subject of intense US foreign policy interest for many years. In particular, Saddam Hussein's regime became a clear threat to US national interests in the Middle East when his troops invaded Kuwait, the oil-rich US protectorate just South of Iraq in 1991. As President Bush argued, the American economy and that of 'friendly countries around the world will suffer if control of the world's great oil reserves fell in the hands of that one man, Saddam Hussein'. As Bush correctly outlined, if Saddam also invaded Saudi Arabia on Kuwait's border, he would possess unparalleled power over the global economy through controlling the vast majority of the world's oil reserves. As CIA Director William Webster bluntly stated, if 'Saddam stays [in Kuwait] he'll own twenty per cent of the world's oil reserves. And a few miles away [in Saudi Arabia] he can seize another twenty per cent'. In responding to this threat to global oil reserves the US sought to build a wide international coalition to repel Saddam and also worked through the United Nations and the Security Council for authorisation of economic sanctions and ultimately military intervention and within hours of the invasion the UN had passed resolution 660 that condemned the invasion, called for a withdrawal of Iraqi troops and authorised the use of force to expel Saddam from Kuwait. Saddam did not leave Kuwait and Gulf War 1 began in August, 1991.

Although the US successfully expelled Saddam's troops from Kuwait, Saddam himself was allowed to remain in place, and economic sanctions were placed on Iraq by the UN. By the end of the 1990s, the UN concluded that the sanctions contributed to a steep increase in the death rates in Iraq including 500,000 deaths above the anticipated rate among Iraqi children under five years of age between 1991 and 1998. This however was viewed as a price worth paying and in a candid interview with Madeleine Albright, then US Ambassador to the United Nations, Leslie Stahl asked 'We have heard that half a million children have died ... is the price worth it?' Albright replied: 'I think this is a very hard choice, but the price, we think the price is worth it'.

However, with the high human cost of the sanctions, coupled with the weakening of the sanctions regime by various states and the terrorist attacks on 9/11, Iraq once again moved up the foreign policy agenda. The Bush administration declared that Saddam's

regime was linked to Al Qaeda, the terrorist organisation behind the financing and planning of the 9/11 attacks. Moreover, Hussein was said to be in possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) that could be used against the United States itself. President Bush argued that we 'know that the regime has produced thousands of tons of chemical agents, including mustard gas, sarin nerve gas, VX nerve gas ... surveillance photos reveal that the regime is rebuilding facilities that it had used to produce chemical and biological weapons'. He continued that Washington also has an 'urgent concern about Saddam Hussein's links to international terrorist groups ... We know that Iraq and the al Qaeda terrorist network share a common enemy -- the United States of America. We know that Iraq and al Qaeda have had high-level contacts that go back a decade. Some al Qaeda leaders who fled Afghanistan went to Iraq'. The second US-led invasion eventually commenced in March 2003. Given the dilapidated state of the Iraqi army after Gulf War 1 and the sanctions regime coupled with the overwhelming military superiority of the US, it is hardly surprising that Saddam's regime was toppled after four weeks.

Why did US policy makers launch the war? There are a multitude of reasons that have been given. First, the invasion's principal goal was to rearrange Iraq politically from a pariah state led by a 'rogue leader' that posed a direct challenge to US interests to one led by a more compliant government that would be able to administer a stable, pro-US oil-rich Iraq. Second, there was an economic component to the invasion insofar as American planners sought to open Iraq's largely nationalized economy to the penetration of foreign capital. A crucial component of this process was the aim to successfully incorporate Iraq's huge energy reserves into the global economy, and this was sought through the mass privatization of Iraq's economy by the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority which was set up after the 2003 invasion. Finally, although very rarely mentioned by US policy makers, Iraq's possession of the second largest oil reserves in the world made it a hugely attractive prize should the occupation and post-war reconstruction be successful.

Obama's rise to Presidency changed the US policy on Iraq considerably. While Bush had pledged to deploy more troops to Iraq in 2007, the Obama administration pledged to leave Iraq two years later. When the last remnants of the US military left the country in 2011, the war had already taken its toll with at least 655,000 Iraqi and 4400 US military deaths. Obama not only made the US withdraw from Iraq but also promised to stay away from wars in other parts of the world turning the page on a decade of war.

The US withdrawal from Iraq posed questions about the future territorial integrity of Iraq and the possibility of a civil war. Taking into consideration the intensity of the Arab Spring, it is not likely that Iraq will be able to settle its own issues quickly as it will most probably be affected by the simmering tensions all over its neighbourhood. Nevertheless, the US withdrawal will help both Iraq and the US recover from the war wounds and make a fresh start.

Key dates

- 1921. The state of Iraq is established by British colonialism.
- 1932. Iraq granted independence by the British.
- 1968. Baath party comes to power through a military coup.
- 1979. Saddam Hussein takes control of Baath party and becomes Iraq's de-facto leader.
- 1980-1988. Iran-Iraq begins when Hussein invades Iran. Over a million deaths. Ends in stalemate.
- 1984. US formally rekindles its relationship with Iraq including strategic help with its war with Iran.
- 1991. Gulf War 1 begins.
- 1999. UNICEF report into child mortality as a result of UN sanctions on Iraq.
- 2003. Gulf War 2 begins.
- 2006. Execution of Saddam Hussein.
- 2007. Bush declared that he would send more than 20,000 extra troops to Iraq, as part of a new strategy for the future of US involvement.
- 2008. Coalition forces focus on training Iraqis to eventually take over security duties
- 2010. The last US combat troops leave Iraq.

- 2010. The US mission in Iraq, previously called Operation Iraqi Freedom, is renamed Operation New Dawn.
- 2011. The last US military personnel withdraw from Iraq.
- 2012. Obama declares the US will no longer fight the world's battles and is 'turning' the page on a decade of war.

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