



### 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the U.S. Invasion of Iraq

March 20, 2023, marked the 20th anniversary of the start of one of the most controversial wars in modern history. In 2003, the United States launched a ground invasion of Iraq with the stated goal of overthrowing President Saddam Hussein and eliminating any suspected weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in the country. However, as the world now knows, US forces never discovered any WMD, and the nation of Iraq remains in a state of turmoil and instability. The war's unjustness, the mistakes made before, during, and after the conflict, and the global impacts it has had over the past two decades continue to be debated and analyzed by scholars, policymakers, and the public alike. Despite the apprehension, prosecution, and execution of Saddam Hussein, Iraq still suffers from economic ruin, political unrest, and interference from both Iranian and American interests. This article will explore how and why America invaded Iraq, the unjustness of the invasion, the mistakes that were made before, during, and after the war, the current state of Iraq, and the global impacts it has had 20 years later. The case for war in Iraq was built years before the actual invasion, with US politicians and ideological leaders laying the groundwork for the occupation of the oil-rich nation. The push for Saddam's overthrow began with President George H.W. Bush's declaration to impose "liberal democracy" in Iraq after Saddam invaded Kuwait in 1990. This declaration opened the door for US neoconservative politicians to push for regime change, and the events of 9/11 provided a pretext for the US to act on these ideological goals. The demands for Saddam's ouster made by Iraqi exiles living in the West also played a significant role. The result was a catastrophic war that led to the deaths of over 200,000 Iraqi civilians and 4,500 American soldiers, however, these numbers are disputed. An estimate by Brown University puts the number of deaths directly related to the conflict at 280,771-315,190. It is estimated to have cost the United States nearly \$2 trillion.

The invasion of Iraq in 2003 saw US, British, and coalition forces swiftly decimate the Iraqi military, driving Saddam Hussein from power and capturing Baghdad just three weeks later. The toppling of a statue of Saddam Hussein in Firdos Square became an iconic moment, symbolizing US triumph and receiving global media attention. President George W. Bush even declared "mission complete" on May 1, 2003, from the deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln. However, the lawlessness that followed was downplayed by the American government, despite swiftly spreading throughout the nation and demonstrating the inability of US forces to restore order. The fall of Baghdad marked a significant moment in the Iraq War, but it was only the beginning of a long and tragic conflict that would shape the region for years to come.

"Weapons of Mass Destruction." These four words will forever be associated with one of the greatest blunders in US foreign policy. The Bush administration's claims that Iraq possessed chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons were proven baseless after Saddam Hussein's capture in 2003. An investigation in 2005 revealed that American intelligence on Iraqi weapons was wholly inaccurate, and no evidence existed to support the allegations of defectors and members of the Iraqi National Congress. The lives of

hundreds of thousands of people were lost in a war that should never have been fought. The lack of accountability for the faulty intelligence and the catastrophic consequence of the war serves as a stark reminder of the importance of truth and transparency in government decision-making. The Iraq Governing Council (IGC), the nation's first post-2003 executive body, was selected through the muhasasa system, a sectarian quota system designed to ensure proportional government representation among the Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish communities. However, this system reinforced sectarian divisions, exacerbating the sectarian violence that still echoes throughout Iraq and the region today. Nouri al-Maliki, Iraq's first prime minister, had strong ties to Iran and connections to armed groups, and his authoritarian and sectarian regime ruled for years. The failure of succeeding governments to reach an understanding with the Sunni majority, as well as corrupt and incompetent governmental institutions, fueled the emergence of sectarian violence across the nation. While Shia uprisings grew in the south, Sunni uprisings erupted in Anbar and Fallujah, with some arguing that a harsh security response in Sunni communities only served to radicalize them further. Ultimately, the lack of security in the region following the withdrawal of US soldiers in 2011 allowed ISIL to strengthen its hold and establish a so-called "caliphate" over large portions of the nation.

The aftermath of the Iraq War has left the nation in a state of turmoil and instability. Despite efforts to establish a democratic government through elections, sectarian violence, and political corruption have hindered progress. The recent protests in 2019 and 2020 showed that the Iraqi people have grown tired of the status quo and are demanding change. However, the government in power today was formed by a coalition with less than 15% of the vote, and many Iraqis feel that their voices are not being heard. As a result, some have turned to leaders who have a history of brutality and violence, such as Shia leader al-Sadr. The situation in Iraq highlights the harsh reality that the invasion has had long-lasting and far-reaching effects that continue to impact the nation and the region.

The 20th anniversary of the Iraq War marks a somber moment in modern history. The war, which was built on ideological goals and faulty intelligence, resulted in catastrophic consequences that are still felt today. The US-led invasion of Iraq toppled Saddam Hussein's regime but left the nation in a state of turmoil and instability. The lack of accountability for the faulty intelligence and the devastating consequence of the war serves as a reminder of the importance of transparency and truth in government decision-making. The disbandment of the Iraqi army and intelligence agencies, and the exclusion of the long-reigning Baath Party from forming a new government, created a security and governance vacuum that caused havoc for years to come. The post-Saddam Iraqi government's sectarian quota system only reinforced divisions and fueled sectarian violence across the nation. It is time for the United States and the international community to recognize their role in the current state of Iraq and work towards finding solutions that prioritize the needs and desires of the Iraqi people. Only then can Iraq move towards a stable and prosperous future.