



The Invasion of Iraq Fifteen Years On

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28 February 2018

Summary

20 March 2018 will mark the 15th anniversary of the invasion of Iraq. Despite President Trump's confident assertions that the Islamic State is defeated there and in Syria, if ORG's predictions from before that invasion continue to hold true, we may be only half-way through a generational struggle. Indeed, dispersal of combatants from Iraq and Syria means that this is becoming an increasingly globalised war in which the West is ill-equipped to prevail.

Introduction

Fifteen years ago this month the largest ever anti-war demonstrations took place in London against the impending invasion of Iraq. There were others elsewhere in Britain and many more in other countries. The political effects were limited and there was little evidence of an immediate impact on governments in Washington and London, even if the longer-term damage to the reputation of the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, would prove to be considerable. The war went ahead in late March, the regime fell within three weeks and on 1 May 2003 President Bush could make his "mission accomplished" victory speech.

This followed his *State of the Union Address* to Congress the previous year after the assumed success of the war in Afghanistan, but in both cases victory turned out to be short-lived. The war in Afghanistan continues to this day and the impact of the Iraq invasion proved to be catastrophic, with many tens of thousands, mainly civilians, killed in a five-year war. Despite a marked

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reduction in casualties between 2008 and 2013 – and around 40,000 civilians still died during this “peaceful” phase – the so-called Islamic State (IS) emerged to take the country back into war in 2014.

Back in the months before the Iraq War, the considered view of most military analysts was that the western coalition would be successful in terminating the Saddam Hussein regime. The Bush administration, in particular, was convinced that there was no alternative to regime termination. With the ending of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and the dispersal of the al-Qaida movement, Bush had extended the war on terror to an “Axis of Evil” of countries supporting terror and seeking to develop weapons of mass destruction, with Iraq, Iran and North Korea being the most important parts of that axis and Iraq the first candidate for regime termination.

Within two weeks of the start of the war, many western news outlets were providing optimistic assessments of the progress as US troops and marines moved closer to Baghdad. Not all analysts were so sure. In one [short report](#) based partly on work at Oxford Research Group published at that time, I argued that a lengthy and bitter conflict lasting for up to thirty years was much more likely. More significantly, this had also been a key conclusion of a major Oxford Research Group study, *Iraq: Consequences of a War*, published five months before the war which, in most respects, proved uncomfortably accurate in its assessment of the likely outcome of an invasion and occupation.

Now, half-way through that possible thirty-year war we have a situation where the powerfully expressed view of President Trump is that the war is actually over, that IS has been defeated, it is indeed “mission accomplished”, and that the US military posture should move away from its emphasis on extreme

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Islamist movements and concentrate far more on interstate rivalries, especially with Russia and China.

In trying to assess whether Trump's view is based on accurate analysis it may be helpful to return to that ORG report, summarise its concerns, see if they were reflected in the subsequent experience of the war and its aftermath and explore whether it can offer any help in suggesting what might avoid many more years of war.

Iraq: Consequences of a War

The [ORG report](#) of October 2002 pointed to three possible consequences:

- While the US had the military power to terminate the regime this would increase regional opposition to the US presence in the Middle East and increase support for extreme elements such as al-Qaida.
- There would be many civilian casualties.
- There was a risk that the regime might be able to use chemical and biological weapons (CBW).

If these are taken in reverse order, the CBW assessment was based on what the UN Special Commission on Iraq (UNSCOM) had determined in its post-1991 work: that the regime at the time had a limited CBW capability and would have used it then if the very survival of the regime was threatened. While this might have been a reasonable prognosis for the 2003 war, it turned out that the UNSCOM inspectors had been highly efficient in their work and all the major elements of the Iraqi CBW programme as it had existed at the time of the earlier war were destroyed during that decade. In this respect the ORG report was too pessimistic, but not in the other two consequences.

On the issue of civilian casualties, the report stated that:

“ Conflict in Baghdad will involve the use of area-impact munitions as well as precision-guided munitions and the civilian casualties will be high. A civilian death toll of at least 10,000 should be expected but this may be a low estimate, given the experience of urban warfare in Beirut and elsewhere.” ”

It was indeed a low estimate given the many tens of thousands of civilian deaths that followed, both directly through coalition attacks and even more so through the bitter inter-confessional conflicts that followed the initial occupation. Thus the ORG report may have been one of the very few pre-war analyses pointing to high civilian casualties even if its prognosis was not sufficiently realistic.

Finally, the use of US military power to terminate the regime not only led to a long war and increased the intensity of the anti-American mood across the Middle East it undoubtedly served al-Qaida and other groups well, doing much to stimulate their further development.

While this argument was made by ORG and a few other critics of the war very soon after it started, for the coalition leadership it was many months before the

consequences began to become clear. Instead, in the first six months after regime termination the Pentagon-led Coalition Provisional Authority took full charge of the country and began the process of creating a free-market economy with very limited regulation. This was part of ensuring the evolution of a pro-Western state that would be radically different to the Saddam Hussein regime. There was no doubt in the minds of the CPA leadership that this would succeed and would be part of a much wider post-9/11 transformation which would enhance the neo-conservative vision of the New American Century.

Thus, the Taliban regime had gone in Afghanistan, al-Qaida was dispersed and Iraq was being reconstructed to a Western blueprint. Such was the embedded nature of a militaristic approach in Western security thinking that serious alternatives could simply not be considered.

Current relevance

In many ways, the view from Washington in mid-2003 was remarkably similar to that of the Trump administration now, in that the success against IS has been so comprehensive, thanks mainly to the intensive three-year air war, that the problem is largely solved and the United States can now prioritise its security against the rising power of China and perceived expansionism of Russia. What is therefore relevant is whether the same mistakes are being made.

A revealing way of assessing this is to go back to the original response to 9/11 in terms of the legislation rapidly passed by both houses of Congress in the days after the attacks. The political impact of 9/11 had been visceral, worse than the Pearl Harbour attack in December 1941 that brought the United States into the Second World War.

According to a recent *New York Times* study in the immediate wake of the attacks in New York and Washington President Bush sought remarkably wide-ranging authority from Congress for military action:

“ “There was no mention of “Afghanistan”, “Osama bin Laden” or “al-Qaeda” in the short resolution known as the *Authorization for the Use of Military Force* or A.U.M.F. It simply says that Congress authorizes the President to use “all necessary and appropriate force” against the nations, organizations or people that “he determines planned, authorized, committed or aided” the terrorist attacks on Sept 11 “to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States by such nations, organizations of persons”.” ”

This very broad remit has enabled the US military, often in collaboration with countries such as Britain, Australia and others, to engage in operations in many different countries in what is now the seventeenth year of war. At its root is a cultural norm which prioritises the use of military force at the expense of other approaches and, in particular, pays relatively little attention to the underlying

factors which enable movements such as al-Qaida, IS and others to maintain support even when facing overwhelming military odds.

That still leaves the issue of whether Trump is right about the latest perception of success and the consequent need to re-orientate the US military posture in the direction of China or Russia. Here, though, the ORG report and more recent work within the organisation suggest that this is as mistaken as Bush's "mission accomplished" declaration. Raqqa may have fallen and IS dispersed but a more pertinent indication would be the ambushing and killing of four US Special Forces soldiers in Niger on 2 October last year.

This was one episode in a continent-wide operation across the African Sahel in which US and other forces are engaged in constant counter-insurgency operations. Nigeria, Niger, Mali, Libya, Kenya, Somalia, Egypt and many other African countries are bound up in this, with further actions across the Middle East and South Asia as well as developments in the Philippines and other parts of South East Asia. All of this is at a time of intensive counter-terror investigations and activities by security and intelligence organisations across Europe and North America, including the UK, where the "terror threat" level is still said to be the highest ever. President Donald Trump, in short, is as mistaken now as was George W Bush in 2002 and 2003.

Conclusion

Trump's vision of a United States now in a position to confront China and Russia may itself be yet another indication of the dangerous prioritising of military power over other forms of engagement but even that dubious shift is almost certainly a serious misreading of the issue of revolts from the margins. More generally, it shows that what is often referred to as the "control

paradigm” in military thinking is deeply embedded, which means, in turn, that we most likely *are* engaged in a multi-decade conflict.

This reinforces the need for radically different approaches to security combined with persistent challenges to current thinking. That is currently down to just a handful of analysts and small organisations such as ORG and [Rethinking Security](#) but it does mean that their work has never been more important.

Image credit: U.S. Navy photo by Photographer's Mate 1st Class Arlo K. Abrahamson/Wikimedia.

About the Author

*Paul Rogers is Global Security Consultant to Oxford Research Group and Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford. His 'Monthly Global Security Briefings' are available from our website. His latest book book *Irregular War: ISIS and the New Threats from the Margins* was published by I B Tauris in June 2016. These briefings are circulated free of charge for non-profit use, but please consider making a donation to ORG, if you are able to do so.*

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