

Crocodile Tears for Iraq

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“This is an act of ethnic cleansing, if you will, almost genocide,” a U.S. military official [warned](#). He was referring to bombings that killed nearly [800 members](#) of the minority Yazidi sect in northern Iraq. “Among the wounded, one in five suffered serious injuries,” while “families of the wounded were so shaken by the attack that they insisted on taking their badly broken relatives back to their villages,” away from the hospitals treating them, the New York Times [reported](#). U.S. officials [attributed](#) this atrocity to al-Qaeda. Surely it called for a calibrated intervention—a series of airstrikes, perhaps, to prevent a potential slaughter.

But these bombings happened in August 2007, years after the U.S. invasion. In that phase of the occupation, Bush “doubled the U.S. presence in Iraq” by sending “150,000 to 170,000 private forces to support the mission there, all with little or no congressional or public knowledge—let alone consent,” as two U.S. academics [described](#) the type of democracy Washington prefers. And its preferred foreign policies—“invading, occupying, weakening and looting Iraq”—“brought al-Qaeda into the country,” Juan Cole [writes](#), emphasizing that the Islamist organization had zero presence there before March 2003.

Iraq developed in line with Washington’s expectations, in other words. “Months before the invasion of Iraq, U.S. intelligence agencies predicted that it would be likely to spark violent sectarian divides and provide al-Qaeda with new opportunities in Iraq and Afghanistan,” the Washington Post [disclosed](#) in May 2007. These grim analyses were “widely circulated within the Bush administration before the war,” which proceeded anyway, with shattering effects.

“The most serious sectarian and ethnic tensions in Iraq’s modern history followed the 2003 US-led occupation,” Sami Ramadani [noted](#) in the Guardian. “The US had its own divide-and-rule policy, promoting Iraqi organizations founded on religion, ethnicity, nationality or sect rather than politics,” he continued, his observations reinforcing those Iraqi political analyst Firas Al-Atraqchi [recently offered](#): “Since the fall of Baghdad in April 2003, the Christian community [has] found itself under attack and tens of thousands have since fled the country in fear of religious persecution.”

For example, “Mandaeans, or Sabians, a sect of people who follow the teachings of John the Baptist and pre-date Christianity and Islam in Iraq, have since 2003 been forced to leave en masse because of a brutal campaign against them.” A 2008 Minority Rights Group International study [concluded](#) that “Mandaeans face extinction as a people.” And an Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization report from June 2013—well into the Obama era—[determined](#) that “[t]he human rights situation facing minorities in Iraq remains in dire straits on all levels: political, civic, and cultural. Iraq’s ethnic and religious minorities, along with other vulnerable populations, continue to face threats of violence, religious discrimination, exclusion, and denial of their property rights.”

U.S. policy outcomes thus indicate Washington's contempt for Iraq's religious minorities. On the other hand, Obama [stressed](#) on August 7 that humanitarian concerns drove him to commence airstrikes—and these words were enough to convince the press that the U.S. government cares about persecuted Iraqis. “There have been reports of scores of civilians being killed,” the New York Times [wrote](#), so “it was not surprising to hear President Obama announce” his decision to intervene. “President Obama was right to order military action to prevent a potential genocide,” the Washington Post [decided](#), while the Los Angeles Times [had](#) no “doubt that the president was moved by the suffering the Islamic State has inflicted on the Yazidis and other victims.” Coverage was even more credulous, if possible, on websites like Slate, where William Saletan simply transcribed Obama's remarks. “We're doing what only we can do” in Iraq, Saletan [insisted](#) on August 8. He knew this because “Obama said the U.S. should step in,” given its unparalleled “capabilities to help avert a massacre.” Confronted with an argument this powerful, even a skilled debater will wither in defeat.

True, the U.S. record in Iraq reveals capabilities different from those Saletan identified. After Operation Desert Storm, for instance, UN Under-Secretary-General Martti Ahtisaari led a mission to Baghdad. Its members were familiar with the literature on the bombings, he [wrote](#) in March 1991, “fully conversant with media reports regarding the situation in Iraq,” but realized immediately upon arrival “that nothing that we had seen or read had quite prepared us for the particular form of devastation”—“near-apocalyptic”—“which has now befallen the country,” condemning it “to a pre-industrial age” for the foreseeable future. This was the scale of ruin when the UN Security Council imposed sanctions—UN in name only, political philosopher Joy Gordon [clarifies](#), since they “were at every turn shaped by the United States,” whose “consistent policy” was “to inflict the most extreme economic damage possible on Iraq.”

The policy was a ripping success in this respect. The UN [estimated](#) in 1995 that the sanctions had murdered over half a million children—“worth it,” in Madeleine Albright's infamous 60 Minutes [assessment](#)—one factor prompting two successive UN Humanitarian Coordinators in Iraq, Denis Halliday and Hans von Sponeck, to resign. Halliday [concluded](#) that the sanctions were “criminally flawed and genocidal;” von Sponeck [concurred](#), finding evidence of “conscious violation of human rights and humanitarian law on the part of governments represented in the Security Council, first and foremost those of the United States and the United Kingdom.”

But eliminating hundreds of thousands of starving children was merely the prequel to the occupation—“the biggest cultural disaster since the descendants of Genghis Khan destroyed Baghdad in 1258,” Fernando Báez [wrote](#). Among its achievements were the assaults on Fallujah in April and November 2004: a UN Emergency Working Group estimated that “40% of buildings and homes” there were “significantly damaged” in the end, “while another 20% sustained ‘major damage,’” and “the remainder were ‘completely destroyed,’” political scientist Neta Crawford [explains](#). Crawford, quoting Bing West's [No True Glory](#), [relates how](#) a top U.S. general, arriving in Fallujah after the November 2004 onslaught, “looked up and down the streets, at the drooping telephone poles, gutted storefronts, heaps of concrete, twisted skeletons of burnt-out cars, demolished roofs, and sagging walls. ‘Holy shit,’ he said.”

U.S. efforts to “liberate” Fallujah's residents—presumably from life's mortal coil—entailed “a cascade of Geneva Convention violations,” [according](#) to scholars Elaine A. Hills and Dahlia S.

Wasfi. Not least of these, U.S. Congressman Jim McDermott and Dr. Richard Rapport wrote, [were](#) “the targeting of medical facilities and denial of clean water [.]” The level of barbarism calls to mind what the UN [described](#) as Israel’s “unprecedented” destruction of Gaza. “Whole neighborhoods and villages have been wiped off the map,” Dr. Mona El-Farra [reported](#) from the Strip, where Beit Hanoun’s mayor, Mohammed al-Kafarna, told the Guardian his town had been pummeled to the point of being “unlivable.” Israel’s six-week bombing monsoon has [killed](#) over 2,000, with U.S. taxpayers funding the carnage.

Since World War II, “the United States has provided Israel \$121 billion (current, or non-inflation-adjusted, dollars) in bilateral assistance,” the Congressional Research Service [determined](#) in April. “Almost all U.S. bilateral aid to Israel is in the form of military assistance,” and “President Obama pledged” in March 2013 “that the United States would continue to provide Israel with multi-year commitments of military aid,” or \$3.1 billion annually in Foreign Military Financing. So we can, if we choose, take seriously the [speeches](#) Obama makes for the cameras. But Washington’s crucifixion of Iraq and support for Israeli sadism show us the real extent to which humanitarian aims propel U.S. policy.

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