

Foolish Wars Have Consequences

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Global Research, July 31, 2018

[Lobe Log](#) 29 July 2018

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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Fifteen years ago, we were still in the early stages of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, “the war that would change everything.” Looking at the Middle East today, I feel an overwhelming sadness as I consider the far-reaching and devastating impact that the Iraq war has had on my country and the region and its peoples.

Neoconservatives had been aggressively pushing the Bush administration to launch a war against Iraq beginning immediately after the horrific terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. They argued that America needed to forcefully respond to the attacks in order to demonstrate that we were not to be trifled with. A decisive show of strength, they claimed, was necessary to clearly establish America’s hegemony and to forestall any move toward multi-polarity in the post-Cold War era.

It bears repeating that the war was based on lies, and by that I don’t mean the lies about Saddam’s nuclear program or his connection to the 9/11 terrorists. Rather the more insidious lies were: that the “war would be a ‘cake walk,’” that it wouldn’t require a significant troop commitment or expenditure of resources, that it would be over quickly, that we would be greeted as liberators, that democracy would take hold in Iraq, and that the entire Middle East would be transformed.

Fifteen years later, only one of these claims turned out to be true: the region would be transformed. But it was not the transformation envisioned by the neo-cons.

Again, it bears repeating just how devastating that war has been. The war itself exposed the deep fissures in Iraqi society, while the US occupation’s uninformed bungling only served to exacerbate these divides. With Iraq’s army and ministries dismantled, the country fell into chaos with competing sectarian militias unleashing a civil war. This resulted in the massive displacement of civilians—millions of whom became refugees or internally displaced—and the decimation of vulnerable religious minority communities. All of this occurred on Bush’s watch.

An additional tragic consequence of the war was the spread of extremism. Al-Qaeda, far from defeated, metastasized into newer and more deadly forms in Iraq, its immediate neighborhood, and countries beyond.

In this weakened and fractured Iraq, Iran found a foothold which it parlayed to its advantage. Today, Iran remains a major player in Iraq and not only there. Another unintended consequence of the war was the unleashing of Iran as a regional power.

Subdued, for a time, by its rival Iraq, Iran now felt empowered to extend itself beyond its borders. Preying on growing anti-American sentiment and sectarian tensions in other

countries, “revolutionary Iran” was emboldened to meddle in regional affairs. This gave rise to the Arab Gulf states feeling the need to assert themselves against this growing and destabilizing Iranian threat.

The neocons’ war also emboldened Israel to more aggressively pursue its agenda to subdue the Palestinians and to expand its colonial enterprise.

The US, once seen as the dominant super power that had won the Cold War and built an international coalition to liberate Kuwait, now found itself bogged down in a war it could not win with its military weakened and demoralized by losses. The US also stood discredited in the Arab World as a result of its bloody failure and abhorrent behavior in Iraq and its stubborn refusal to confront its client/ally Israel.

The neoconservative’s blindness to Middle East realities did indeed give birth to a “New Middle East,” but it was exactly the opposite of the one they had imagined.

As the region descended into multiple new crises—with deadly wars in Syria and Yemen—the impact of the Iraq war became even more pronounced. Iran was a player in each of them. The Gulf states also became involved seeking ways to combat aggressive Iranian advances which challenged and threatened them. Al-Qaeda and its offshoots played a new and deadly role in Iraq and Syria. And new players like Russia and Turkey, each defending what they saw as their interests, also emerged as regional actors.

All the while, the US, weakened diplomatically and still licking its wounds from the war in Iraq, was too war weary and wary of becoming directly involved in new regional crises. Some blame the Obama administration for passivity. But this fails to recognize the reality that the post-Iraq, the US military cautioned against engagement in conflicts they could neither manage nor see how their entry, without a long-term commitment—in which they loathed to engage—could help bring about a resolution.

In this new chaotic multi-polar world, conflicts spin out of control, becoming more deadly and destabilizing as they grew. The Syrian conflict has taken the lives of a half-million while forcing over five million to become refugees. This has created new pressures in neighboring countries and unleashed an xenophobic tidal wave that is now challenging democracies in Eastern and Central Europe. And the battle in Yemen, which began as an effort to restore the legitimate government that had been overthrown by a rebel faction, has morphed into a draining regional conflict and a humanitarian disaster.

And so here we are fifteen years later, with the US reduced to playing a supporting role in a deadly conflict in Yemen and a backup role for minor players in Syria. The mono-polar world envisioned by the neo-conservatives has given way to a multi-polar region—with Iran, Russia, Turkey, the Gulf States, and the US all engaged, in varying degrees, in conflicts—all, seemingly, without end. This is the house that the Iraq War built.

At this point, one can only imagine what the Middle East would be like if fifteen years ago, we had not engaged in that foolish war. Iraqis might still be struggling against their dictator, but one million Iraqis would not have died and their society would not have been destroyed. Iran’s people would still be struggling against its regime, but Iran would be contained. And the US, its capacity for leadership and prestige still intact, would be in a position to play a far more constructive role in regional diplomacy and conflict resolution.

I write this not to “cry over spilt milk,” but as a cautionary note. Foolish wars have consequences with which we are forced to live. We need to learn from them in order to not be so foolish in the future.

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Feature image: The destruction of the Great Mosque in Mosul (Wikimedia Commons)

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