

For America, Denial Is a River in Iraq

By [Global Research News](#)

Global Research, January 21, 2014
newsvandal.com/

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

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [IRAQ REPORT](#)

by JP Sottile

Americans [don't know much about geography](#).

We can barely find Iraq on a map, much less “fix” it with our troops and drones.

In 2006, three years into the bloody War on Iraq, [63% of Americans aged 18-24](#) couldn't find the “target-rich” nation on a map. To be fair, [only half could find New York State](#) on a map, so it is unsurprising that, in spite of its then-dominance of the news cycle, they couldn't locate the principal fixation of American foreign policy on a map that still [brims with U.S. military bases and deployments](#).

It's been nearly eight years since that geography test and just over two years since President Obama [declared an all-too-Pyrrhic victory](#) as some of the last remaining troops returned home. In March of 2012, just a few months after Obama opined about Americans leaving with “their heads held high,” the President's current Deputy National Security Adviser, Antony J. Blinken, [proclaimed at the Center for American Progress](#) that “Iraq today is less violent, more democratic and more prosperous” than “at any time in recent history.”

Armed with this rosy view of “recent” history, Blinken doubled-down on Iraq's bright future in July of 2012 when he wrote with a sunny, Reaganesque optimism that it was “[Morning in Mesopotamia!](#)” And that was it. For all intents and purposes, Iraq disappeared from the map as soon as America walked away from the furies it had capriciously and [illegally](#) unleashed on the Iraqi people.

Like geography, America doesn't do accountability.

But now Iraq is back in the headlines and, as with every day since the 2003 invasion, there is a great deal of mourning in Mesopotamia. And, as with every day since the snipe hunt for WMDs could no longer be justified, the story of Iraq remains cloaked in denial about America's responsibilities to sovereign nation that was invaded under false pretenses, its government toppled, its infrastructure obliterated and its people killed in numbers that still haven't been accurately tabulated.

The names are familiar—Fallujah, Ramadi and Anbar Province. And so is the unwillingness of the political, military and foreign policy establishments to deal directly with the fact that serious crimes have been committed and nothing has been done to reconcile the U.S. with Iraq—no formal apology has been made, no decision-makers held to account nor any reparations paid to the Iraqi people.

This fundamental denial flows right through the middle of U.S. policy in the Middle East.

Although the War on Iraq is widely and quite cavalierly regarded as a “strategic blunder” in the United States, the view around the world and in the region is quite different. After the Shock and Awe, world opinion shifted [almost immediately against the United States](#). More importantly, the [Pew Global Attitudes Research Project found in 2012](#)—the same year as “Morning in Mesopotamia”—that the median favorability rating for the U.S. among key nations in the region was 21%. China came in at 45%. The survey didn’t include the nations most affected by the war—Iraq, Iran and Syria. And that median number reflects to some extent Israel’s 83% favorable view of the U.S. The next highest was Lebanon at 47%.

Back in the U.S., a reliably myopic and co-dependent media encourages denial among Americans. Since [CNN “quietly” shuttered its Baghdad bureau](#) last year, news from the steadily decaying country has been hard to come by, even as Iraq suffered a daily onslaught of bombings and attacks that [made 2013 its deadliest year since 2007](#). Perhaps to its credit, CNN was the last TV news operation standing, but its departure completed a [full retreat by the American news media](#) that began, perhaps coincidentally, shortly after Obama won the White House.

After taking office, Obama dismissed the idea of accountability for the second Bush Administration or, by extension, for those within his own party who—like pre-emptive 2016 front-runner Hillary Clinton—aided and abetted its grand schemes in Congress. To wit, he [quickly declared](#) that he wanted his administration to “look forward, as opposed to looking backwards.”

“Don’t look back” is big hit with incoming administrations. It’s the careful karaoke and sanguine sidestep we get instead of truth and consequences. Bill Clinton sang the song as he entered the White House. His administration [let a long-forgotten scandal called “Iraq-gate” just fade away](#) and [operatives in the first Bush Administration](#) skated by without so much as a slapped wrist for the illegal arming of ... wait for it ... [Saddam Hussein](#).

Funny how all roads lead to Iraq. Less funny is how often the scene of the crime involves the usual suspects.

Enter al-Qaeda. Well, not quite. Although the news media shouts alarming headlines stating that “al-Qaeda” has taken Fallujah and Ramadi, a closer read reveals that “al-Qaeda” is actually “The Islamic State in Iraq and The Levant,” which is an “al-Qaeda linked” group (whatever that means). The editors at [Time prefer to call it](#) an “al-Qaeda franchise.”

Franchise? Like the terms “linked” and “affiliate,” it’s a handy bit of branding without discernable proof of a direct connection to the notorious al-Qaeda of Osama bin Laden. Is there an actual headquarters somewhere issuing franchisees a license to kill in the name of Allah? Can’t anyone with a Twitter account or a black flag claim the moniker of al-Qaeda? And didn’t the United States kick open the door to [a regional civil war](#) in the first place?

Perhaps the willingness of insurgents around the region to adopt the name “al-Qaeda” is more of a reflection of, and reaction to, America’s ham-fisted military policies than it is proof of a “resurgence” of Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaeda. But those nuances are lost on a media that prefers to focus on the pain and anguish of U.S. military veterans who, as [the USA Today reported](#), “feel the sting” of losing Fallujah and Ramadi to al-Qaeda. Little attention, if any, is paid to the repeatedly stung Iraqis who’ve had to live through America’s grand adventure, enduring the sectarian hell it unleashed and the unrelenting chemical and

radiological fallout that poisons [their landscape](#) and [their bodies](#).

Rather than focus on the plight of an erroneously targeted people who were killed in vain, mainstream American media [looks in vain for a salve](#) to dull the lingering pain of those sent into a maelstrom [the media itself helped to create](#) in the first place.

Now the U.S. government is [sending rockets and drones](#) to assist Iraq in the fight against franchisees and door-to-door jihadists. Without irony, the U.S. Congress bloviates about [putting conditions on military aid](#) to an “untrustworthy” Iraqi government and it postures over [sending Apache helicopters](#). But the U.S. will not send an apology or the one thing that could possibly make a difference—reparations. Yes, reparations. Like other wrongful wars, the War on Iraq demands a full accounting. Based on precedents set during wars in the 20th Century—like the [reparations for Iraq’s illegal invasion of Kuwait](#)—tens of billions of dollars are [due the Iraq people](#) for “death, injury, loss of or damage to property, commercial claims and claims for environmental damage.”

It’s really no different than someone who was wrongfully convicted of a crime, spent years in prison and then had the conviction vacated after being cleared by DNA evidence. Although it happens with [an uncomfortable regularity](#), it is a reminder that it’s never too late for justice to be served. Usually, the aggrieved party is awarded a substantial amount—money he or she can use as they see fit in attempt to rebuild a life that was destroyed in error.

Isn’t that the story of Iraq?

Of course, that narrative doesn’t work for “recent” historians like Antony Blinken. Echoing George W. Bush, [Blinken proposed](#) that “the wisdom of going to war in Iraq” will be debated for years and that it is best to leave it to historians. Luckily for Blinken and the foreign policy establishment he represents, Americans know [as much about history](#) as they do [about geography](#).

And, as the Benghazi debacle showed, Americans [still don’t know much about geography](#). In May of 2013, [only 58% of those polled](#) could place Benghazi in Libya—the site of yet another festering sectarian conflict unleashed by U.S. policy. But when it comes to coping with the truth and consequences of America’s globe-trotting militarism, they can find denial all over the map of the Middle East. And, as the saying goes, it isn’t just a river in Egypt.

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