

The Iraq Report: 19 Years After Its Fall, Baghdad Struggles to Rise Again

By [The New Arab](#)

Global Research, April 19, 2022

[The New Arab](#) 13 April 2022

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

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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

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Decades of unsanctioned wars and foreign interference have proved devastating for Baghdad, as Iraq continues to struggle with political instability, economic collapse, and widespread social unrest.

When the city of [Baghdad](#) was founded by **Abbasid Caliph Abu Jaafar al-Mansur** in 762 CE, it was given the epithet of “Madinat ul-Salam” – in English, the City of Peace.

While it certainly experienced long periods of peace, such that it was able to contribute to the rise of the Islamic Golden Age during the reign of Harun al-Rashid in the 9th century, it was always a victim of its own success.

As the Islamic seat of power and learning, it attracted the avarice of marauders and invaders. Most notably, it was sacked by Mongol invaders led by Hulagu Khan in 1258 CE, who proceeded to destroy the famed House of Wisdom that was home to the likes of the 9th century’s polymath [al-Kindi](#) or his contemporary [al-Khwarizmi](#), whose algorithms are now essential to all modern technology.

Of course, since the departure of the Mongols, Baghdad has been the focus of numerous conquests and reconquests by rival empires. It has been under the sway of the Ottomans, Seljuks, Safavids, the British Empire and, most recently, the United States as part of its destructive global [War on Terror](#).

Since Baghdad was last subjected to a foreign invader in 2003, it has yet to rise again and continues to suffer the after-effects of an unsanctioned American-led war based on lies.

The lie of WMDs

It is an established part of the [historical record](#) that former Iraqi dictator, **Saddam Hussein**, possessed chemical and biological weapons. These weapons were openly used by his

government during the war with Iran in the 1980s, with the Iraqis themselves also coming under Iranian chemical weapon attack.

However, it has since been established beyond all doubt that Iraq's stockpiles of such weapons and its wider weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) programme had been decommissioned ever since Saddam's forces were [defeated](#) and expelled from Kuwait following the US-led Operation Desert Storm in early 1991.

As part of the ensuing "peace", Iraq had to submit itself to extensive United Nations weapons inspections which, as is now undeniable, succeeded in its mission of [disarming Saddam's regime](#).

Nevertheless, and in the hasty run-up to the war, the White House under George W. Bush and the British government under Tony Blair began a wholesale campaign of [deceptions](#) and exaggerations in an attempt to amp up the public's fears of Iraqi WMD deployment against the West.

This was partially effective as large segments of the media [parroted their governments' line](#) without question. On the other hand - and despite the very recent memory of 9/11 - it was wholly ineffective with the public themselves, leading to [some of the biggest protests in global history](#), with three million descending on the streets of Rome alone, and one [million people demonstrating](#) in London.

Still, the cries of millions in the West went entirely unheard by their respective governments and a "coalition of the willing" was formed because the United States was unable to get their upcoming war on Iraq sanctioned by the United Nations, thereby breaching international law when US-and UK-led troops invaded Iraq in March 2003.

Iraqi brain drain

Conventional military operations against the Iraqi armed forces did not last long, and Baghdad itself came under a ferocious "[shock and awe](#)" aerial bombardment campaign before falling on 9 April - the latest in a long line of destructive conquests of the unfortunate city.

Image on the right: At the start of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, President George W. Bush ordered the U.S. military to conduct a devastating aerial assault on Baghdad, known as "shock and awe."
(Source: Consortiumnews)



Very few things were spared, and very few living creatures emerged unscathed. Widespread looting of priceless cultural and historical [artefacts](#) took place – with US forces themselves often implicated – and this included the torching of the Iraqi National Library and National Archives, containing manuscripts that were millennia old and part of the cultural and intellectual heritage of humanity. Even animals were not spared, as hundreds of captive animals [died of starvation](#) at Baghdad Zoo.

But perhaps worse of all is that the ongoing nightmare of violence that was ushered in from the fall of Baghdad continues to this day.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, Iran-backed Shia militias – many of whom worked for the interior ministry that was under the control of the Badr Brigades – began a concerted campaign to specifically target Iraq’s intelligentsia for assassination.

Countless academics, scientists, engineers, and medical doctors were abducted and murdered. This led to such fear that many took their families and left their country, leading to an [Iraqi brain drain](#).

This marked a dark hour for Iraqi academia as, despite the oppressive nature of the regime, Saddam’s Baathist government [encouraged education](#) and almost totally eradicated illiteracy by making refusal to learn to read, write, or learning numeracy a [criminal offence](#).

Education was not only totally free, but it was also open to any citizen of any Arab League country as part of the Baathists’ pan-Arab nationalist agenda.

Now, however, Iraq’s education system is in dire straits. Not only are about one-fifth of the entire population [illiterate](#), but UNICEF says that [school enrolment rates are low](#) and dropping, as children are forced out of education in order to work to support families that have lost their main breadwinners to the incessant internecine conflicts that have wracked Iraq since 2003.

Clearly, and considering Iraq’s rich intellectual heritage, such a state of affairs ought to be cause for not only national concern, but also international.

A lack of education is known to lead to greater social inequality, which increases poverty and also contributes to allowing radical organisations such as the Shia militias or the Islamic State (IS) group to easily recruit desperate people.

What’s next for Baghdad?

Although IS was declared defeated in 2017 and Iraq is technically at peace, the country’s problems cannot be limited to one extreme group alone.

Arguably, the main reason why Baghdad has failed to stagger to its feet once more after the destruction wrought upon it since 1990 and especially since 2003 is the state of the country’s wider [political situation](#).

Iraq is under the sway of competing global powers, particularly the [United States](#) and Iran. However, Tehran has almost certainly [won](#) the tug-of-war for influence and control in Baghdad’s halls of power, with Iraq slowly drifting towards becoming a [theocratic rump state](#) at Iran’s beck and call.

Iran not only influences Iraqi politics, but habitually uses Iraqi territory to settle scores against its rivals. This has included firing salvos of rockets against US targets, engaging its militia proxies to [assassinate dissident academics](#), and openly [bombing](#) targets in northern Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region, claiming to target Israeli interests.

Tehran successfully does all this while the Iraqi authorities do very little – a marked departure from relations between the two countries in the run-up to the Iran-Iraq War.

While the government may do very little, the Iraqi people themselves have held a series of protest movements, most recently one that began in 2019 that led to a brutal crackdown. More than 600 demonstrators calling for reforms and an end to foreign – especially Iranian – interference were [killed](#) by Iraqi security forces and allied Shia militias.

In all likelihood, and as Iraq's economy continues to freefall despite [windfall profits](#) generated from fears of oil scarcity due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it is almost certain that we will continue to see periodic protest movements. Even with economics aside, the politicised judiciary, sectarianism, and lack of accountability for corrupt officials will also provide fuel for demonstrations.

The more protesters see their peacefulness is being met with deadly violence and torture, the less peaceful these [protests](#) are likely to be.

In a country where IS managed to make it to Baghdad's city limits in 2014, a large-scale, armed insurrection similar to that seen in other Arab Spring countries such as Syria will pose an existential threat to the state set up by the US in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion.

This could either lead to a popular revolt that overthrows decades of foreign interventionism, finally restoring Baghdad to its status as the City of Peace, or it could drown the city in blood as powers like Iran pour resources into the conflict to ensure they do not lose their most valuable imperial possession.

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