



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **The Unexpected Aftermath of Operation 'Iraqi Freedom'** Al-Marashi, I.

### **Citation**

Al-Marashi, I. (2003). The Unexpected Aftermath of Operation 'Iraqi Freedom'. *Isim Newsletter*, 12(1), 20-21. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/16878>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/16878>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# The Unexpected Aftermath of Operation 'Iraqi Freedom'

IBRAHIM AL-MARASHI

In the US and UK policy analysis circles, 'overnight experts' dominated the airwaves and the discourse on Iraq, which would later influence those government bodies that conducted the war. As a confession, I was also featured prominently in the US and UK media, and believed that my assessments were of more value since I had devoted my academic career to studying Iraq. Yet, even I made many of these failed assessments, due to the fact that I left my native country when I was a child and since most of my views on Iraq were influenced by the Iraqi exile community. Nevertheless, the dearth of public knowledge on Iraq led to many false predictions of how the war would evolve and how the Iraqis would react to the American and British presence once Saddam was removed.

## Assessing Iraq's past

These failed forecasts could partially be attributed to American and British academic circles, where the study of Iraq has been neglected, with only a handful of scholars that can be genuinely characterized as experts. The literature on Iraq suffers from a lack of research conducted within the country itself. Simple logistical reasons have led to this deficiency, as archival work and fieldwork in Iraq was nearly impossible. While the literature lacks an internal analysis of how the Iraqi state and society function and operate, several authors have published works on Iraq's internal politics. Prominent among them is Kanan Makiya's work, which gives a detailed background to the emergence and foundation of the Iraqi security apparatus and Baath Party. While his book *The Republic of Fear* is considered the textbook on Iraq's internal politics, Makiya wrote the book while in exile. In the US and UK, Peter Sluglett and Charles Tripp are among the few scholars who have recently written on Iraq, while other known scholars include the Israeli academics, Amalia Baram and Ofra Bengio. All have conducted their research on Iraq from outside of its borders. In fact, the last substantial work based on research in Iraq only covered the period up to the 1958 Revolution in Iraq; the late Hanna Batatu's work is based upon the secret records of the Iraqi monarchy, which were made public after the 1958 Revolution. Nevertheless, the few academic experts were not featured prominently in the media: perhaps out of their own volition; perhaps they were never contacted. In fact, in the US and UK media circles, former military generals dominated the media outlets, demonstrating the media obsession with how Iraq was being destroyed. Little attention, however, was given to how it would be rebuilt.

Much of the literature on Iraq has focused on its eight-year war with Iran or the 1991 Gulf War, primarily devoted to the military aspects of the wars, with no works dealing with the internal Iraqi politics during the conflict. While the literature primarily dealt with the international diplomacy surrounding the invasion and subsequent military conduct of the 1991 Gulf War, there is a general lack of information on the events that took place inside of Kuwait from 2 August 1990 to 16 January 1991. While numerous works have been written on the subject, including military analyses, eyewitness accounts, and journalistic pieces, not one has utilized primary documents produced by the Iraqi state it-

**As Operation Iraqi Freedom has come to a close, the US has declared victory in achieving its objectives. Given the rapid pace of this campaign, most analysis focused on the course of events, with little academic and often inaccurate assessment of the war and its aftermath in Iraq. Such assessments are crucial when addressing the question of whether Iraq will survive as a viable state, as well as what form it will take. Faulty forecasts about Iraq's future, combined with failing to understand its internal political dynamics could have disastrous effects on both the Iraqi people and the American and UK forces stationed there.**

self during its occupation of Kuwait. In other words, there is a lack of research on how Iraq administered and defended its 'Nineteenth Province'. Understanding such internal Iraqi political dynamics during the Iran-Iraq War or the 1991 Gulf War would have been critical to understanding how the Iraqis would have defended the country in what is really the Third Gulf War. One could argue that research on Iraq's internal dynamics during these two wars could not be conducted due to Iraqi government restrictions. However, since 1999, an often under-utilized electronic archive of four million cap-

tured Iraqi state documents from the Iran-Iraq War, as well as 300,000 documents from the 1991 war, has been publicly available.

It is questionable that even the few works on Iraq were properly consulted and analysed by the powers that conducted Operation Iraqi Freedom. These doubts were confirmed when a UK intelligence dossier on Iraq's intelligence agencies, presented to Colin Powell in February 2003, was found to be plagiarized from a historical, academic article I had written on Iraq's intelligence agencies. After this affair, one must ask how familiar the US and UK governments really were with Iraq before they launched this war.

## Assessing the war

The neglected study of the internal dynamics of Iraq's domestic politics and security apparatus led to many failed forecasts when US and UK forces went to war against those institutions of the Iraqi state. The American and British media as well as the policy-making 'think tanks' provided many failed assessments of how the war would be fought. Generally, these institutions predicted the Shi'i population in the south would revolt against their Sunni, Tikriti masters, leaving the toughest battle to the 'decapitation' of the regime in Baghdad. On the contrary, the Shi'ites did not revolt, the most pitched battles were in the south, and Baghdad fell relatively easily. It was predicted that Saddam's elite Special Republican Guard and security organizations would fight to the very end to defend the capital; however, the para-military organizations such as Fidayin Saddam, which did not have formal military training, posed the most serious challenge to coalition forces. Finally, Saddam's feared weapons of mass destruction were not deployed against military forces as they approached Baghdad.

The Iraqis were mistakenly classified into two camps: pro-Saddam and anti-Saddam factions, and thus once the pro-Saddam factions were vanquished, the anti-Saddam tendencies in Iraq would rally behind the US. The US forecasts failed to account for the role of Iraqi nationalism and the Iraqi citizens' loyalty in defending the nation opposed to the regime. For example, reports on 25 March 2003 from British military forces stationed around Basra, stated that civilians had revolted against Iraqi government forces. In fact, no revolts occurred in Basra; nor did they occur in most of the Shi'i towns of the south. When the leader of the Supreme Assembly of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, Ayatullah al-Hakim, was asked about why no Shi'a revolt materialized, he said that '[t]here are a number of reasons why there has not been an uprising, most important of which is that Iraqis perceive the United

States as an occupying rather than a liberating force. The second reason has to do with people's strong sense of nationalism, the painful memories of the war of 1991, and the fear that anyone who rises up against the regime will be crushed.' After the Second Gulf War, in March 1991 an uprising began in Basra and literally spread overnight throughout the south of Iraq. However, the US failed to support this uprising and Iraq's Republican Guard brutally crushed it, leaving many Shi'ites feeling abandoned by the US, and such feelings among the Shi'a were not taken into account.

## Assessing Iraq's future

Prior to the invasion of Iraq, many inaccurate assumptions were made such as that Iraqi soldiers would not fight at all, American forces would be greeted as liberators, and Iraqi exiles would be enthusiastically received. Once the war had finished, assessments failed to take into account the almost immediate animosity directed towards the US once Saddam was removed, and what the Iraqis envisioned for their future state. Currently there are numerous, often contradictory, visions for a post-Saddam Iraq, ranging from a US-supported, neo-Baathist Iraq in the guise of a democracy, to a decentralized, federalist Iraq proposed by the exile opposition and Kurdish groups. On the other end of the spectrum, many Iraqis are calling for an Islamic state/theocracy, with disagreement over whether it should be formed on the Iranian model.

As Iraq's Shi'ites mobilize to play a dominant role in Iraq, amply demonstrated by their holy processions in the last week of April, US administration officials admit they underestimated their organizational strength and were unprepared to prevent the rise of an anti-American, Islamic theocracy in the country. A *Washington Post* article stated: 'As the administration plotted to overthrow Hussein's government, U.S. officials said this week, it failed to fully appreciate the force of Shiite aspirations and is now concerned that those sentiments could coalesce into a fundamentalist government. Others were more focused on the overriding goal of defeating Hussein and paid little attention to the dynamics of religion and politics in the region.' The US administration fears that the Iraqi Shi'a would come under the sway of Iranian influence. Were some of these US officials to buy a copy of Yitzhak Nakash's book, they would realize that the Shi'ites' strong sense of Iraqi nationalism and a resistance to the Iranian concept of a single supreme Shi'iteruler (*velayat-e faqih*) would keep the Islamic Republic's influence in check.

The failure to understand Iranian foreign policy, especially in the US, could lead to disastrous consequences for the future of Iraq. Those in the US administration that argue Iran should be denied an influence in Iraq, ignore the centuries-old historical ties between the Iranian Shi'ites and those in Iraq and fail to comprehend the religious significance of

the holy sites in Iraq for all Shi'i Muslims. US forces in Iraq cannot change this historical legacy. Additionally, the idea of exporting the Iranian revolution has long expired in Iran's foreign policy, but rather the Iranians are more weary of yet another American satellite state on the other side of its borders.

While the US focuses on alleged Iranian attempts to influence the Shi'a towns of Najaf and Karbala, there are mounting tensions developing in the predominantly Shi'i district of Baghdad known as Saddam City, which has now been renamed Sadr City, in honour of the clerical family that has played a pivotal role for this community. For the most part, US forces have not been deployed here, and the district has been run by armed factions who support the Sadr faction in the growing contention over who will dominate Iraq's Shi'icommunity.

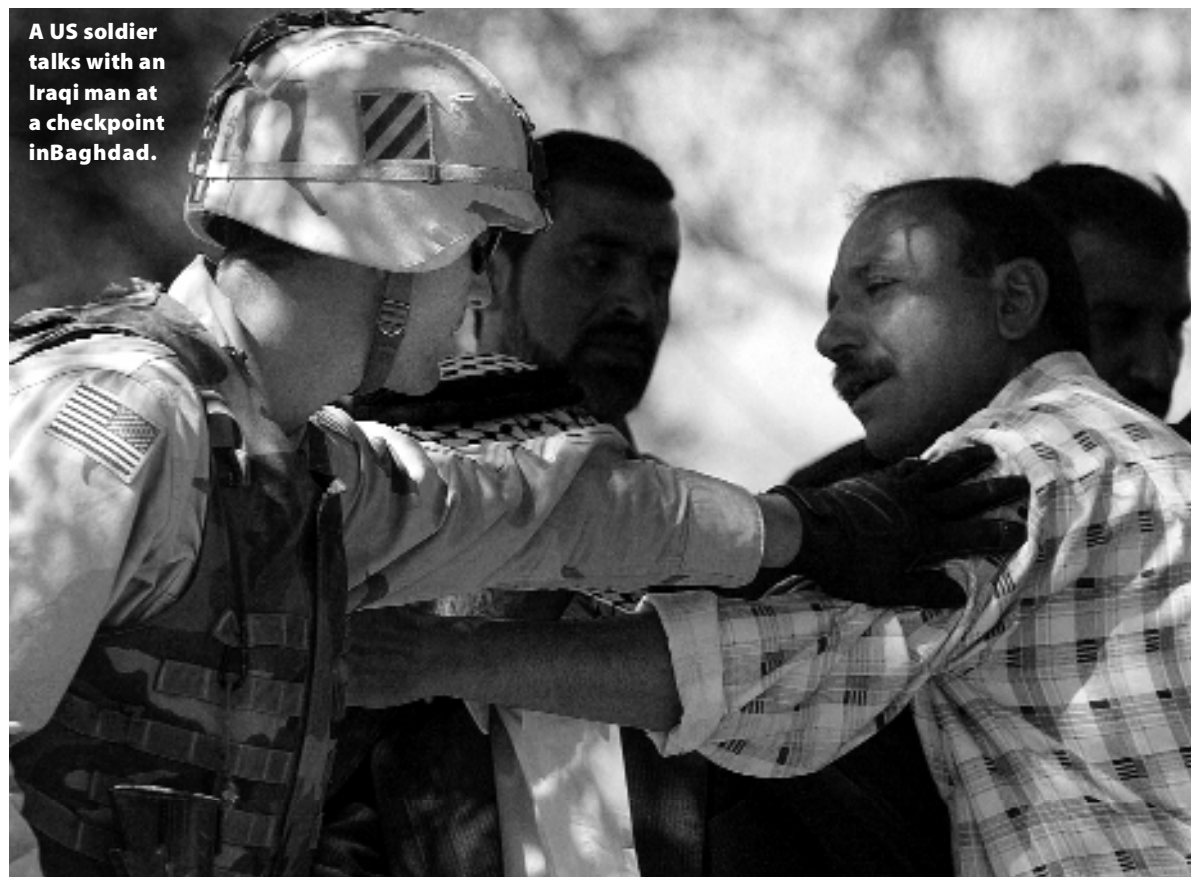
As the American forces are focused on Iran's attempt to influence southern Iraq, they have neglected to maintain a strong presence in the north. Perhaps they have not fully appreciated the historic conflict between the Kurds, Iraqi Turkomans, and Arabs in towns such as Kirkuk and Mosul, and will not see the signs of the potentially dangerous ethnic conflict that is taking shape in this region. The forces of the Kurdish Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan moved into the northern Iraqi cities of Mosul and the oil-rich Kirkuk, despite Turkish warnings not to do so, arguing this would be the basis for the creation of an independent Kurdish state. Turkish troops have not been deployed in northern Iraq as many analysts predicted, and yet the Kurds have not indicated that they will withdraw completely from these cities.

The failure to understand Iraq's history and politics lead to many miscalculations of how Operation Iraqi Freedom would evolve, and how the Iraqi people would react to US presence. Additional miscalculations could have disastrous results. The US should heed the lesson of the Great Iraqi Revolt of 1920, which united the disparate communities of the Shi'ites, Sunnis, and Kurds in the newly created mandate of Iraq in a common animosity towards the British forces in Iraq. All the ingredients are present for a second Great Iraqi Revolt. The Iraqi nation was created from the ravages of the First World War, launched a nationwide revolt in the 1920s, suffered through the Second World War, underwent revolutions in 1958, 1963 and 1968, dealt with an almost continuous Kurdish rebellion and a mass uprising in March of 1991, and had three disastrous wars with foreign powers. Neither Iraq nor the Americans stationed there need a second Great Revolution.

Ibrahim al-Marashi is a Ph.D. candidate at St. Antony's College, Oxford, UK, and is a research associate at the Center for Non-proliferation Studies in California, USA.  
E-mail: [ibrahim.marashi@st-antony.oxford.ac.uk](mailto:ibrahim.marashi@st-antony.oxford.ac.uk)

## Notes

1. Kanan Makiya, *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998).
2. Marion Farouq-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958: From Revolution to Dictatorship* (London: IB Taurus, 2001).
3. Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002).
4. Amazia Baram, *Culture, History and Ideology in the Formation of the Ba'thist Iraq* (MacMillan: London, 1991).
5. Ofra Bengio, *Saddam's Word: Political Discourse in Iraq* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1998).
6. Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (Princeton: Princeton UP 1978).
7. Available from the Iraq Research and Documentation Project ([www.fas.harvard.edu/~irdp](http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~irdp)).
8. Ibrahim al-Marashi, 'Iraq's Security and Intelligence Network: A Guide and Analysis', *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 6, no. 3 (2002).
9. Omayma Abd el-Latif, 'Resisting Occupation', *al-Ahram Weekly On-Line*, no. 362 (3-9 April 2003).
10. Glenn Kessler and Dana Priest, 'U.S. Planners Surprised by Strength of Iraqi Shiites', *Washington Post*, 23 April 2003.
11. Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994).



A US soldier talks with an Iraqi man at a checkpoint in Baghdad.