The Human Cost of U.S. Interventions in Iraq: A History From the 1960s Through the Post-9/11 Wars

Zainab Saleh[1]

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The United States government has justified decades of intervention in Iraq in a variety of ways, the most recent of which is the current "war on terrorism." All of these interventions have had devastating costs and consequences for Iraqis. Since the 1960s, the U.S. has treated Iraq as essential to its own economic and geopolitical interests; Iraqi arms purchases have bolstered the American military-industrial complex and stable access to Middle East oil has secured U.S. dominance in the global economy. As the U.S. has pursued these interests in Iraq, U.S. interventions have reshaped the Iraqi social, political, and cultural landscape. While the role the United States has played in Iraq since the 1960s is beginning to receive some scholarly attention, it remains widely unknown to the American public.

Iraqis have lived in the shadow of U.S. interventions for decades, whereby the United States has attempted to control events and resources in the Gulf region. In 1958, the fall of the Iraqi monarchy brought an end to British influence in Iraq and the emergence of the United States as a major player in Iraqi affairs. In 1963, under the pretext of protecting the region from a communist threat, the Central Intelligence Agency backed the Ba'th coup, an Arab nationalist party, after Iraq nationalized most of its oil fields. During the 1980s, the United States supported Saddam Hussein's regime and prolonged the Iran-Iraq War in order to safeguard its national interests in the region, which entailed weakening Iran after the Islamic Revolution in 1979 to prevent it from posing a threat to U.S. power in the Gulf. After Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, the U.S. policy shifted from alignment with Iraq towards "dual containment" of Iran and Iraq, and culminated in the Gulf War of 1991 to drive Iraq out of Kuwait. In the 1990s, the United States justified its imposition of economic sanctions by claiming a goal of disarming Iraq of weapons of mass destruction and protecting allies after the Gulf War of 1991. In 2003, the U.S. packaged its invasion of Iraq in 2003 as delivering U.S. values—namely, freedom and democracy—to the Iraqi people.

I was born in Iraq and lived there until 1997. Later, I conducted ethnographic and archival research with and on Iraqis who had migrated to London since the late 1970s. The Iraqis I knew and met in the course of my research (2006-2019) felt that we Iraqis were pawns in an international game of politics and that our lives did not matter. Iraqis in Iraq and in the diaspora saw the Iran-Iraq War as a war of attrition supported by the United States

[1] Zainab Saleh is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Haverford College. Email: zsaleh@haverford.edu

and European countries to bog down two powerful countries in the Middle East. They also saw the sanctions as a way of punishing the Iraqi people while enriching those affiliated with the regime. Moreover, they were acutely aware of the role the United States played in supporting Saddam Hussein in the 1980s and in keeping him in power in the 1990s because the United States feared the establishment of an Islamist government. In supporting Hussein, the US upheld an authoritarian regime that resulted in the deaths of millions of Iraqis, destroyed the Iraqi social and environmental fabric, and led to a massive exodus of Iraqis from the country and the formation of Iraqi diasporic communities abroad. In 2003, therefore, when the US invaded Iraq and brought down Hussein, Iraqis reckoned that the United States decided to bring about regime change not in service to "fighting terrorism," as was claimed, but to better serve U.S. interests in the region.

In this article, I describe U.S. interventions in Iraq both before and after 9/11 and shed light on its human costs by focusing on the life story of Rasha, an Iraqi woman who was in her early 30s when I met her in London during fieldwork in 2006. Rasha had arrived in London in 2004 after the death of three of her friends in Iraq, following the U.S. occupation. Her account of her life reflects the ways the U.S. interventions in Iraq have impacted different generations, and the ways wars, sanctions, and uncertainty have shaped her experiences and trajectory. Indeed, U.S. interventions impacted her family even before she was born. Her father was imprisoned for four years after the CIA-backed the Ba'th Party in 1963, cutting short his dreams to be the first one in his family to attain a college degree. As a child during the 1980s, Rasha saw her father and family live in fear of him being recruited into the Iran-Iraq War, which was prolonged by the United States. Moreover, the United States' and Britain's role in undermining all efforts to lift the harsh economic sanctions imposed on Iraq in the 1990s exposed the family to destitution and downward mobility. Finally, in 2003, the U.S. invasion of Iraq displaced Rasha and her family and furthered their economic and legal precarity until 2010. These developments in Iraq had engendered chronic conditions of dispossession for Rasha and her family since the early 1960s.

The Ba'th Coup of 1963

The 1958 Revolution, which toppled the monarchy in a coup led by nationalist officers, was a pivotal moment in Iraq's relations with imperial powers. While the fall of the monarchy led to the departure of the British, it also brought Iraq into the orbit of the United States more directly. The establishment of Iraq as a republic, and the efforts of different Iraqi politicians to gain control over the country's oil, heralded the beginning of U.S. interventions in Iraq. Hard-liners in the CIA, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and National Security Council (NSC) considered the overthrow of the monarchy "as an act of insubordination that threatened the geopolitical order of the region and its economic foundation."[2] U.S. officials were particularly concerned with Iraq's efforts to nationalize its oilfields and with the alliance between the prime minister Abdul Karim Qasim and the communists. After Qasim withdrew Iraq from the Baghdad Pact in 1959 – which was an anti-communist security alliance that included Iraq, Turkey, Pakistan, Britain, and Iraq – and accepted military and economic aid from the

[2] Wolfe-Hunnicutt, B. (2015): Embracing Regime Change in Iraq: American Foreign Policy and the 1963 Coup d'état in Baghdad. *Diplomatic History 15*(1), 99.

Soviet Union, "the [U.S.] National Security Council formed a special working group on Iraq to monitor the situation and consider the options for bringing about a change in the government."[3] In April 1959, the National Security Council formed "Special Inter-Agency Working Group" with the "purpose of determining what the U.S. Government either alone or in concert with others, can do [redacted] to avoid a Communist takeover in Iraq."[4] In early 1960, the CIA founded a program of covert activity in Iraq, with the aim of eliminating communists through external intervention.

The turning point in U.S. foreign policy toward Qasim was Iraq's nationalization of its oil resources in December, 1961. Law 80, the nationalization decree, did not impact the Iraq Petroleum Company's operation in existing fields. It only transferred ownership of oil fields that were not yet in production. While the U.S. State Department recognized Iraq's right to nationalize its oil, it feared the action would set a precedent in the region. NSC member Robert Komer advocated for a strong response to Law 80. He warned that Qasim would "have a stranglehold on ME oil," and called for the support of a "nationalist coup [that]…might occur at any time."[5] In August 1962, the Kennedy administration sent Roy Melbourne to Baghdad as a new U.S. Chargé d'Affaires. Melbourne was a hardline member of the National Security Council and a veteran of the coup against Mohammad Mosaddeq in Iran. With his assistance and backed by the CIA, on February 8, 1963, the Ba'th Party staged a coup d'état that toppled Qasim.[6] At the time, Qasim's reign was characterized by a bitter conflict between the communists and Arab nationalists – including Ba'thists – over whether Iraq should become part of a union with Egypt and Syria. As such, the coup began with a slaughter of Iraqi communists (the police and National Guard relied on lists provided by U.S. intelligence sources to hunt communists down).[7] Between 7,000-10,000 communists were imprisoned and tortured, and thousands were killed.[8] Komer predicted that the new regime would be pro-Western and "reasonable with the oil companies."[9] The U.S support of the Ba'th coup "was part of a broader imperial ambition to establish a network of subordinate political units,"[10] and constituted one example of a series of coups worldwide, including those in Iran (1953), Guatemala (1954), Congo (1960), Cuba (1961), Vietnam (1963), and Indonesia (1965).[11]

With the fall of the monarchy in 1958 and ensuing reforms, the standard of living of Rasha's family changed tremendously. The first Iraqi president's reforms—including the

[3] Wolfe-Hunnicutt, B. (2018). U.S.-Iraq, 1920-2003. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History 1,* 10.

[4] Wolfe-Hunnicutt (2015): 103.

[5] Quoted in Wolfe-Hunnicutt (2015): 111.

[6] Wolfe-Hunnicutt (2015): 113.

[7] Khalidi, R. (2004). *Resurrecting Empire: Western Footprints and America's Perilous Path in the Middle East* (pp. 41). Boston: Beacon Press; See also, Khalidi, R. (2009) *Sowing Crisis: The Cold War and American Dominance in the Middle East* (pp. 151). Beacon Press.

[8] Batatu, H. (1987). *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of Its Communists, Ba'thists, and Free Officers* (pp. 988). Princeton University Press; The number of communists killed is unsettled. Batatu quotes different sources that put the number between 340-5000. Wolfe-Hunnicutt puts the number of executed communists at 5000 (2018: 11).

[9] Quoted in Wolfe-Hunnicutt (2015): 120

[10] Wolfe-Hunnicutt (2015): 122.

[11] Wolfe-Hunnicutt (2015): 124.

opening of hospitals throughout the country, the allocation of affordable loans to build houses, and the expansion of free education—opened up a different future, especially for Rasha's father. As a result of these reforms, her father went to Baghdad to study for his BA in English literature and got involved in the Iraqi communist scene in the city.

But the CIA-backed Ba'th coup of 1963 cut short her father's dream of obtaining a college degree. Because he had joined the Iraqi Communist Party, he was sentenced to four years in the notorious Nugrat al-Salman Prison in the south. His imprisonment was a traumatic event for him and for his family. He was subjected to brutal torture with the hope that he would break down and provide names of his comrades in the communist party. His family did not know his whereabouts or whether he was still alive until a friend who was released from prison told them he was still alive. After his release, the father could not resume his college education because he has been out of college for too long. Instead, he took a preparatory course to become a schoolteacher in his hometown.

The Iran-Iraq War

The memories of the four years of imprisonment during the Ba'th coup in 1963 came to haunt the family again after Saddam Hussein came to power in 1979. He began with purging the Ba'th Party, liquidating the Iraqi Communist Party, persecuting the Shi'i opposition and Kurdish movements, expelling the so-called Iraqis of Iranian origin, and eliminating and silencing anyone else who was perceived as a threat to his rule. While Rasha's family enjoyed economic prosperity following the oil boom in the 1970s, during which time they also moved to Baghdad, life under Hussein's reign returned them to a life defined by fear and uncertainty. The increasing oppression of communists under the reign of Ahmed Hasan Al-Bakr and later under Saddam Hussein exposed Rasha's father to the possibility of arrest and disappearance, a fate many of his communist comrades faced in the late 1970s. Rasha grew up listening to her fathers' stories about disappeared friends, who were arrested by the regime and never came back to their families. She sensed her parents' fear that her father might meet a similar fate and his family might know nothing about his whereabouts.

The rise of Saddam Hussein as the undisputed leader of the country and the Islamic Revolution in Iran in the late 1970s brought about a major shift in U.S.-Iraq relations. In 1979, the Islamic Revolution in Iran overthrew the Shah, who was a close ally of the United States, and the ensuing U.S. embassy crisis in Tehran prompted the United States to look for other allies in the region. Iraq emerged as a countervailing force to the new regime in Iran. At the time, Zbigniew Brzezinski, a national security advisor, stated in a television interview that "we see no fundamental incompatibility of interests between the United States and Iraq," and that "we do not feel that American-Iraqi relations need to be frozen in antagonism."[12] Shortly after the Islamic Revolution, in 1980, Iraq invaded Iran, starting the Iran-Iraq War. The documents on whether the Carter administration gave Iraq the green light to invade Iran

[12] Quoted in Jentleson, B. W. (1994) *With Friends Like These: Reagan, Bush, and Saddam, 1982–1990* (pp. 34). W.W. Norton.

remain classified.[13] Yet scholars have documented how, since the early 1980s, the United States supported Iraq in its war efforts. A major breakthrough in U.S.-Iraq relations occurred in 1983 when Donald Rumsfeld, a special envoy for the Reagan administration at the time, met with Saddam Hussein to offer military and economic aid to Iraq. As a result of this meeting, the United States took Iraq off the State Sponsors of Terrorism List, restored diplomatic relations, and provided Iraq with "dual use" (military and civilian) goods.[14] The United States granted Iraq millions of dollars in trade credits, and U.S. farmers found a new market in Iraq. Moreover, the United States sold weapons to Iraq through Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. It also encouraged European countries—in particular, Italy and France—to sell weapons to Hussein. Western governments, especially West Germany, even provided Iraq with chemical weapons.[15] In the meantime, the Ronald Reagan administration dismissed Hussein's brutality as a "stereotype" and hailed the signs of moderation that the regime was showing.[16] The United States' support of Saddam Hussein's regime had direct impact on Iraqis who had to endure losses due to the Iran-Iraq War, which lasted eight years, in addition to persecution and authoritarianism.

The outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War furthered the sense of anxiety Rasha's family experienced. The government's establishment of a popular army to replenish the regular national army during the war meant that Rasha's father could be sent to the front at any time, even though as a teacher and sole breadwinner in the family he should have been exempt from military service. To have some peace of mind, her father spent his summers in Poland until travel was banned in 1983, after which he spent summers in Mosul. Rasha's cousin was killed in the war, and her aunt's fiancée went missing four days before their wedding and was never found. These personal tragedies were a source of anguish for the family. The atmosphere of fear brought about by the war and the increasing oppression of political opponents permeated their house.

During the "Tanker War" from 1984 to 1985, the United States began to engage actively on the side of Iraq in order to weaken Iran. The war began when Iraq attacked Iran's oil installations and Iran retaliated by attacking ships in the Gulf doing business with Iraq. Western governments—namely, the United States, Britain, and France—increased their presence in the Gulf. U.S. forces engaged in clashes with Iranian naval units, destroyed Iran's naval capacity in 1988, and shot down a civilian Iranian plane.[17] In addition to military support, the United States defended Iraq at the United Nations against Iran's accusation that Iraq had used chemical weapons on its soldiers, and it provided Iraq with satellite intelligence of Iranian troops' locations.[18] Iran, realizing it was involved in a war not only with Iraq but also with Western powers, particularly the United States, accepted a UN-brokered cease-fire.

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[13] Wolfe-Hunnicutt (2015): 35. See also, Wolfe-Hunnicutt (2017).
[14] Wolfe-Hunnicutt (2015): 15.
[15] Jentleson (1994): 42–49.
[16] Jentleson (1994): 48.
[17] Tripp, C. (2007). *A History of Iraq* (pp. 230). Cambridge University Press
[18] Wolfe-Hunnicutt (2018): 15.

After diminishing the power of Iran, Saddam Hussein turned his attention to Kurdistan, where an insurgency against his regime had erupted. In 1988, Hussein's military operation culminated in the regime's use of chemical weapons against the Kurds. Hussein's government destroyed 80 percent of all the Kurdish villages and killed an estimated 100,000 to 200,000 people.[19] In response to its use of chemical weapons, the U.S. Senate passed a bill calling for economic sanctions against Iraq. The Reagan administration, however, opposed the bill, which then failed. Secretary of State George Shultz said that the attacks on the Kurds "were abhorrent and unjustifiable," but one of his deputies thought the sanctions were "premature," while another official claimed that the United States needed "solid, businesslike relations, with Iraq."[20] By 1988, Iraq had become "the twelfth largest overall market for American agricultural exports," while the United States had become a major importer of Iraqi oil.[21] In addition, the United States kept providing Iraq with dual-use technologies. Any sanctions on Iraq would mean that U.S. companies would lose billions of dollars in contracts. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce urged the House Foreign Affairs Committee chairman to "set aside the emotions of the moment," and "ponder the economic costs of sanctions against Iraq."[22] The U.S. Iraq Business Forum—made up of major oil companies like Amoco, Mobil, and Exxon, defense contractors like Lockheed Martin, and other Fortune 500 companies, including AT&T and General Motors—led the anti-sanctions lobbying.[23]

As such, the United States' intervention in the Iran-Iraq War and support of Saddam Hussein despite his atrocities meant that Iraqis endured persecution and violence, and encountered the U.S. interventions for years before a more direct U.S. involvement, which took place after Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990.

The Gulf War of 1991 and U.S.-Led Economic Sanctions

The end of the Iran-Iraq War did not provide a reprieve for Rasha's family, who grew even more anxious about the increasing persecutions of regime opponents, especially after the use of chemical weapons against the Kurds. Moreover, the prospect of another war loomed shortly afterwards. Iraq borrowed heavily to fund its war with Iran, and by the war's end it had accrued forty billion dollars in debt to Kuwait. Iraq refused to pay the debt and objected to Kuwait's increase in oil production, which brought down the price of oil. In the summer of 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait.

This ushered in another shift in U.S.-Iraq relations towards a policy of "dual containment" of both Iran and Iraq" since the invasion jeopardized the status quo in the Gulf region that the United Stated wished to maintain.[24] Following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, the United Nations imposed sanctions on Iraq as a means to force Hussein's regime to withdraw from Kuwait. The sanctions included restricting imports of food and goods in a country that

[19] Tripp (2007): 236; Ali Allawi puts the number of Kurds who died during *al-Anfal* at 200,000. See Allawi, A. A. (2007). *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace* (pp. 38). Yale University Press.
[20] Quoted in Jentleson (1994): 69.
[21] Jentleson (1994): 81–82.
[22] Jentleson (1994): 84.
[23] Jentleson (1994): 84.
[24] Wolfe-Hunnicutt (2018): 16.

was heavily dependent on foreign products, and the undermining of the sale of oil in exchange for food.[25] Joy Gordon called the sanction years, from 1990 to 2003, an invisible war waged mainly by the United States and Britain through their efforts to cripple any attempts to lift the sanctions by members in the United Nations.

Moreover, the United States formed an international alliance to drive Iraq out of Kuwait. In 1991, the military operations that followed, known as Operation Desert Storm, had a devastating impact on Iraq. The massive U.S.-led bombing campaign, which took place over forty-three days, caused an estimated $232 billion in damage.[26] The heavy bombardment not only targeted military installments but also the infrastructure, including water and sewage treatment, agricultural production and food distribution, health care, communication, and power generation.[27]

The U.S. defeat of the Iraqi army was followed by uprisings in the north and south against Saddam Hussein's regime. Motivated by President George H. W. Bush's call upon the Iraqi people to overthrow the regime, people in Basra, Amara, Nasiriyya, Najaf, and Karbala rose against the regime and managed to control large areas by the end of February 1991. At the same time, the Kurds rose against the regime in the north, and peshmerga forces – Kurdish military groups – were in control of most of Kurdistan by the end of March. However, the United States and its allies did not provide the rebels with support, fearing the formation of a Shi'i state beholden to Iran and the fragmentation of Iraq.[28] At the time, Colin Powell asserted "for the previous ten years, Iran not Iraq had been our Persian Gulf nemesis. We wanted Iraq to continue as a threat and a counterweight to Iran."[29] This lack of support led to the failure of the uprisings.

After 1990, Rasha began to look back nostalgically at the 1980s, under Saddam Hussein, as a time of plenty when people were "stronger and more optimistic." To Rasha, the 1990s were defined by the hardships that resulted from UN-imposed sanctions, which pushed the family to the verge of destitution. When I first met Rasha in 2006, the financial and economic hardships her family endured during the 1990s and early 2000s still preoccupied her. While she talked extensively about the sanctions, she seldom mentioned the Iran-Iraq War, the invasion of Kuwait, the Gulf War, or the failed uprisings in the north and the south. This silence in her daily conversations was especially poignant in light of her family's experiences during the Iran-Iraq War and the Gulf War, when, as I mentioned earlier, her family feared that her father would be conscripted into the Popular Army, and they lost two relatives in the 1980s. Furthermore, they lived near the Amiriyya Shelter, whose bombing by the U.S.-led coalition in 1991 made news headlines in Iraq and abroad when four hundred trapped people burned to death inside. It was only when I interviewed Rasha and asked her about her experiences during these events that she talked about them, and even then, her comments were brief. Instead, she spent more time reflecting on the hardships her

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[25] Gordon. J. (2010). *Invisible War: The United States and the Iraq Sanctions* (pp. 87). Harvard University Press.
[26] Gordon (2010): 89.
[27] Gordon (2010): 34.
[28] Tripp (2007): 248.
[29] Quoted in Haddad. F. (2011). *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (pp. 74). Columbia University Press.

family experienced under the sanctions. After her father retired, he opened a gold shop to supplement his pension. However, the fluctuating market and the inflation of the 1990s resulted in economic failure:

> My father lost everything: the building he owned, his gold shop, our house, and the two cars he had. We sold our house and had to rent a house in a cheaper area. We also sold the chinaware in order to make ends meet. The economic insecurity took its toll on the family relationships. We began to have a lot of fights because we didn't know how to organize a budget. The pension wasn't enough. I was in tears many times because I wanted the bus fare and my father didn't have money to give me. I was in college at the time, and I had to tutor children in our neighborhood to make some money. The education system collapsed at this point, and teachers were no longer teaching, so students who could afford it relied on tutors. It became very hard to buy a new shirt for instance. It took tremendous efforts to get a new shirt.

These economic hardships led to social changes that made Iraqi society unrecognizable to Rasha. As a result of the inflation, the middle class began to lose its ground, and traditionally lower-class jobs gained new value. Handymen, mechanics, and drivers began to make more money than state employees, teachers, and doctors. Though travel was no longer banned in the 1990s, most people could not afford the exit fees and the cost of living in Amman given the collapse of the Iraqi currency. Rasha felt like a prisoner who did not know what was going on in the world. Her family no longer went out to socialize with friends or visit stores to buy luxury items and could not afford to travel abroad. The sanctions engendered cultural and scientific blockade. According to Rasha, women dreamed of finding an Iraqi groom who lived abroad even if he were below her in education and social status.

After Rasha finished her undergraduate degree in English literature, she decided to do a master's degree in the English language and continue her work as a tutor to pay for her expenses. Unlike the older generation, who took it for granted that they would find a good job after finishing college, Rasha could not find a full-time job after getting her master's degree. She was so desperate that she agreed to work in a lawyer's office where she had to clean the bathroom and serve water and tea to clients. She had to quit when one of her sisters got mad that Rasha took a job that was beneath her. After a short while, she took a job in a photocopying and translating office. Rasha spent all of her time in the office photocopying and had to do the translating at home, even though she had applied for the job of translator. She had to accept her boss's unfair demands because she needed the money. In 2000, Rasha finally found a job as a translator in an international humanitarian organization. The job enabled Rasha to work in her specialty and also brought about a reprieve from economic hardship, as the salary matched the inflation rate. Rasha became the main breadwinner in her family, and the income allowed her to have a decent life again.

Rasha's life under the sanctions reflected the harsh conditions under which the majority of Iraqis lived due to staggering inflation. The sanctions had a devastating impact on the Iraqi people. Families struggling to make ends meet had to sell their possessions, including furniture, cars, jewelry, clothing, electronic goods, and part of their houses, such as

doors and windows.[30] In addition, the sanctions led to an increase in crime, theft, and prostitution. The basic monthly rations distributed by the Iraqi government prevented mass starvation in the country, but they did not limit malnutrition. The sanctions "caused hundreds of thousands of deaths, decimated the health of several million children; destroyed a whole economy; made a shambles of a nation's education and health care systems; reduced a sophisticated country, in which much of the population lived as the middle class .... ; and in a society notable for its scientists, engineers, and doctors, established an economy dominated by beggars, criminals, and black marketeers."[31] It is estimated that at least 500,000 children died between 1990 and 2003 due to malnutrition and lack of basic services.[32] When asked by a journalist about the price of half a million Iraqi children for the sanctions, Madeleine Albright, the secretary of the state under the Bill Clinton administration, infamously replied that "the price is worth it" in order to exert pressure on Saddam Hussein's regime to disarm.[33]

The U.S. Occupation Starting in 2003

In the late 1990s, the Iraq National Congress (a London-based Iraqi opposition group), represented by Ahmed Chalabi, secured a victory in its efforts to get the Clinton administration committed to a policy of regime change in Iraq. After failing to have access to high-ranking officials in the U.S. State Department, Chalabi began to establish contacts with the neoconservatives, who were agitating to see Hussein removed from power. Of all the Iraqi opposition groups, the INC and Chalabi were seen as sympathetic to the neoconservatives' plans for Iraq.[34] Chalabi worked with U.S. congressional staffers to write the Iraq Liberation Act (ILA).[35] Signed by Bill Clinton in 1998, the act stated that "It should be the policy of the United States to support efforts to remove the regime headed by Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq and to promote the emergence of a democratic government to replace that regime."[36] The ILA also provided funding for the opposition.[37] Yet, despite the announcement of the ILA, the Clinton administration remained equivocal about bringing about regime change in Baghdad.

The election of George W. Bush in 2001, the attacks of September 11, the rise of neoconservatives in the new administration, and the failure of the United Nations to uphold the sanctions imposed on Iraq and to resume weapons inspection combined to reorganize U.S. policy. The new administration perceived Iraq as a threat and worked toward a plan of regime change—by unilateral means, if necessary.[38] The September 11 attack and the "War on Terror" that ensued sealed the fate of Saddam Hussein. Members of the Bush

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[30] Gordon (2010): 37.
[31] Gordon (2010): 87.
[32] Gordon (2010): 37.
[33][91177info]. (2011, February 9). *Madeleine Albright - The deaths of 500,000 Iraqi children was worth it for Iraq's non existent WMD's* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RM0uvgHKZe8
[34] Allawi, A. A. (2007). *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace* (pp. 67). Yale University Press.
[35] Gordon (2010): 67.
[36] Quoted in Allawi (2007): 62
[37] Quoted in Allawi (2007): 67.
[38] Tripp (2007): 270.

administration saw the War on Terror as having long-term implications, beyond the immediate overthrow of al-Qaeda, in that it could be employed in order to reshape the international order according to U.S. interests.[39] The United States turned its attention to regimes that were seen as hostile to its interests and were suspected of developing chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons.[40] The case against Iraq was built on the claim that it was developing weapons of mass destruction. Between March 19 – May 1, 2003, the United States led Operation Iraqi Freedom, which achieved its purpose of overthrowing the Hussein regime.

Following the U.S. invasion, the situation in Iraq deteriorated even further. Iraqis looted and destroyed state institutions while the U.S. military stood by; troops only protected the Ministry of Oil. The U.S. occupation of Iraq and the measures taken by the Coalition Provisional Authority (a transitional government that the U.S. established after the invasion, headed by Paul Bremer between 2003-2004)—such as the institutionalization of a sectarian quota system, the alienation of Sunnis, the disbanding of the army, the de-Baʻathification order, and the failure to protect Iraqi borders—fueled an insurgency in the country and led to rampant sectarian violence. Suicide bombings, car bombs, and explosions by foreign and Iraqi insurgents became daily occurrences.

The U.S. military employed brute force to deal with the violence and the attacks on its troops by Iraqi insurgents and international fighters associated with al-Qaeda. The leaked pictures of abused and brutalized prisoners at the notorious Abu Ghraib prison epitomized the U.S. military's use of extreme violence against Iraqis.[41] The devastation caused by the violence and the occupation was accompanied by a total collapse of basic services due to corruption and the absence of the state. The U.S. occupation of Iraq and the sectarian politics of successive Iraqi governments eventually led to the rise of the Islamic State, which controlled large swathes of Iraq in 2014 until its defeat in 2017 by the Iraqi state with help from the United States. [42]

The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the violence that ensued made Rasha's life more precarious. She increasingly was surrounded by death due to the violence accompanying the occupation. Shortly after the fall of the regime, Rasha lost a Canadian colleague who was shot in the crossfire between U.S. troops and Hussein loyalists. A few months later, Rasha lost a colleague when her office was destroyed in a car explosion. Rasha escaped death because her driver was an hour late to that office due to traffic.

In early 2004, Rasha lost another friend, Sulaf. This young woman had worked with Rasha in the same building between 1998 and 2000, and along with another woman, Mary, they had become close friends. Following the U.S. occupation of Iraq, Sulaf and Mary applied

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[39] Tripp (2007): 271.

[40] Tripp (2007): 271.

[41] For a detailed account of torture at Abu Ghraib, see Hersh. S. (2004). Torture at Abu Ghraib. *The New Yorker.* https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/05/10/torture-at-abu-ghraib

[42] For a history of the rise of the Islamic States, see Saleh. Z. (2015). The Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS). In *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*. Oxford University Press.

for work as interpreters for the Coalition Provisional Authority in the Green Zone.[43] One day, Rasha was in her office when she heard an explosion. It took place at the entrance of the Green Zone. She worried that Mary and Sulaf were hurt. While Mary was badly injured, Sulaf was missing. Three days after the explosion, Rasha went to visit Sulaf's family. She found Sulaf's brother crying at the entrance of the house. When he saw Rasha, he asked her to wish Sulaf peace. Rasha could not believe that Sulaf was dead. The brother told Rasha that he had recognized her from the ring that Rasha and Mary had given to Sulaf on her birthday a month earlier.

Losing three friends in the span of nine months was tremendously depressing for Rasha. She began to fear for her own life since more and more people who worked for international organizations were being targeted by terrorist groups. A French colleague advised her to go to Jordan for a training course and then try to go to London for a few days for a change of scenery. A few days after her arrival in London, Rasha decided that she would not return to Iraq. She was lucky enough to find a job as a secretary with the same international organization for which she had worked in Baghdad. Though the position entailed a demotion, she felt happy that she could sort out her legal status through a job.

Rasha did not want to apply for asylum in Britain. Even though she had been in London for less than a week, she had heard many stories about the near impossibility of getting asylum and about the limbo in which Iraqi asylum seekers lived. Getting a work permit and having the ability to stay in Britain legally did not confer security or stability. Rasha's visa was to be renewed annually, and the laws kept changing regarding acquiring the indefinite leave to remain kept changing. When I met Rasha, she was living in constant fear of losing her legal status due to changes in the law. Unlike Iraqis who arrived in London in the late 1970s and early 1980s and who encountered no difficulties in obtaining the indefinite leave to remain through work, investment, or asylum, Rasha left Iraq at a time when UK authorities saw Iraqis as unwanted asylum seekers and burdens. Rasha joined millions of Iraqis who were stranded in different countries unable to get a visa or legal status in a host country. The U.S. occupation of Iraq and the ensuing violence forced around 9.3 Iraqis to leave their homes. They either became internally displaced or fled the country to Syria and Jordan, which represent 37% of the pre-war population.[44]

Rasha's anxiety about the future was compounded when her family was forced to flee Iraq for Syria in 2006. In Iraq, her family received anonymous death threats because a family member—Rasha—had worked for an international organization when she lived in Iraq. The family moved to Syria since the Syrian government, unlike the Jordanian government, still allowed Iraqi refugees in the country. The influx of almost one million Iraqi refugees in 2006 put a strain on social services and the infrastructure in Syria. While the Syrian government

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[43] The Green Zone is a fortified area in the center of Baghdad that served as the headquarter of the the Coalition Provisional Authority during the US occupation of Iraq and is still the center of international and Iraqi governmental institutions and organizations.

[44] Vine. D., Coffman. C., Khoury. K., Lovasz. M., Bush. H, Leduc. R., Walkup. J. (2020). Creating Refugees: Displacement Caused by the U.S. Post-9/11 Wars. *Costs of War Project*, Brown University. https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2020/Displacement_Vine%20et%20al_Costs%20of%20War%202020%2009%2008.pdf

allowed Iraqis to settle and young children could go to school, they prohibited them from working legally. Rasha's brother and brother-in-law had to work under the table to make money to support their families. Rasha supported her parents and siblings with money she sent from the UK. Meanwhile, the family applied for refugee status with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and hoped to be settled in a European country. The family lived in limbo and did not know when their asylum application would be processed until 2010 when UNHCR granted them asylum and resettlement in Finland.

Conclusion

The United States' support of the first Ba'th coup in 1963, its arming and assisting of Saddam Hussein's regime in the 1980s, its bombardment of Iraq in 1991, its imposition of sanctions in the 1990s and early 2000s, and its occupation of Iraq in 2003 have forced Iraqis to live with the risk of death for decades. The US occupation of Iraq after 9/11 was just the latest event in a series of U.S. interventions in the country that have spanned decades. Yet mainstream U.S. media have tended to treat the deaths of Iraqis as instances of collateral damage, misidentified the deaths as solely the casualties of violence perpetuated by Saddam Hussein, or only focused on the problem of U.S. responsibility for the deaths that have occurred after 2003.

Through support for Saddam Hussein, the prolonging of regional Middle East wars, and then direct military interventions, the United States has created conditions of death and dispossession for Iraqis inside Iraq and in diaspora. Because of U.S. imperial entanglement in Iraq, Iraqis have lived in the shadow of wars and authoritarian brutalities for decades. Violence has constituted the rhythm of everyday life in Iraq, rather than being an interruption of it. The intervention of the United States in Iraq has produced a volatile situation, and rendered Iraqis disposable human beings whose suffering and death has warranted little attention in the U.S.[45] The United States' practices and policies have unequally distributed life and death, claiming the power to kill populations outside its national territories. While the United States sometimes killed Iraqis directly through bombardment and the imposition of sanctions, it also turned a blind eye to the death of Iraqis at the hands of Saddam Hussein through the support of his regime and prolonging of his wars. In these instances, it was not only an illiberal state that was killing its own citizens, but also a liberal state eliminating the lives of imperial subjects in the name of national security, democracy and freedom, and the protection of global peace.[46]

The imperial encounter between Iraq and the United States has made life deeply precarious for Iraqis. For decades, they have lived with fear for their own and their family's lives, the loss of loved ones and homeland, the realities of economic hardship, and the destruction of the very fabric of their social lives.

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[45] Thinking about the notion of sovereignty, J. A. Mbembe argues that "war, after all, is as much a means of achieving sovereignty as a way of exercising the right to kill." He asks, "under what practical conditions is the right to kill, to allow to live, or to expose to death exercised?" Speaking of racialized politics of colonial violence, Mbembe advances the argument that "sovereignty means the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not." See Mbembe. A. (2003). Necropolitics. *Public Culture 15*(1), 12, 27.
[46] Mbembe (2003).