

## How Mass Atrocities End: Iraq

Seminar Note

May 14–15, 2013

The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy

### The WPF Seminar Series

The World Peace Foundation, an operating foundation affiliated solely with The Fletcher School, aims to provide intellectual leadership on issues of peace, justice and security. It believes that innovative research and teaching are critical to the challenges of making peace around the world, and should go hand-in-hand with advocacy and practical engagement with the toughest issues. It regularly convenes expert seminars to address today's most pressing issues.

This seminar is part of a multi-year research project sponsored by the WPF on How Mass Atrocities End. Additional resources can be found on our website and blog.

This seminar note is organized around prominent themes that emerged throughout the seminar. Participants' responses were non-attributable.

### OVERVIEW

This seminar on mass atrocities in Iraq was a significant departure from the recent series of programs and reports marking ten years of direct U.S. military engagement in Iraq. Placing violence within the country's longer modern history, it explored the level, patterns, origins and endings of episodes of mass violence, especially mass atrocity against civilians.

Rather than debate the U.S. record, seminar discussions were focused on Iraqis' experiences of mass violence, from diverse perspectives—historical, sociological, political, demographic and statistical, environmental. Iraqi scholars and specialists framed an agenda for studying patterns of violence around Iraq's history and politics, including domestic governance and societal relations, and relations with neighboring states and international powers.

Another marked difference between this seminar and other treatments of Iraqi violence was the break from treating Iraq as a *sui generis* case and instead placing it within a comparative framework drawn from the study of other cases of repression, inter-state war, civil war and intervention.

#### Among the episodes discussed were:

- Post-1968 violence as Saddam Hussein consolidated power;
- The context of the Iran-Iraq war;
- The military campaigns against the Kurds including the Anfal;
- Repression of post-1991 Gulf War uprising;
- Destruction of livelihoods of the Marsh Arabs;
- Violence in the context of the post-2003 U.S. occupation.

**Recurrent themes included:**

- The destruction of the political opposition by the Baathist regime and the later dismantling of the Iraqi middle class through the pauperization of society associated with the post-1991 international sanctions;
- The installation of fear as a tool for political control, associated with both real threats to the government and Saddam's paranoia;
- The politicization of sectarian identities and divisions, both by Iraqi political leaders and by U.S. policies;
- Territorial control: efforts at state control of territories, populations and livelihoods under the Baathist regime (most strikingly manifest in the destruction of the Marsh Arabs' way of life and the Arabization of Kirkuk), and more recently in sectarian and ethnic divisions and disputes;
- The implications of state strength and weakness: the implementation of repression either being precisely targeted against individuals (as with the Anfal) or generally targeted at communities (as with the 2005-7 civil war), and past endings of campaigns of mass violence being associated with the government either establishing control (as with the completion of the Anfal in 1988) or losing control (as with the state's de facto abandonment of Kurdistan in 1991);
- The significance of memory and representation of past violence and victimhood, with victimhood being instrumentalized as a means of making claims on political power;
- An as-yet unmet need for a national reckoning with the diversity of forms, roles and histories of violence as a political tool in Iraq.

**Four Decades of Mass Violence: Overview of Types and Contexts**

The past four decades in Iraq have witnessed an appalling diversity of forms and contexts of violence. While violence against civilians has recurred over centuries, it was the Saddam regime that initiated and perfected modern methods of large-scale violence in Iraq. Following the Baathist coup d'état in 1968, Saddam rose to power in the mid-1970s and established a powerful and coercive security state that crushed all political opposition. While consolidating his grip on power, Saddam initially deployed selective, theatrical displays of violence to create a culture of fear. Having eliminated all organized internal threats, he continued to use violent repression, apparently disproportionate to any immediate political challenges, as a means of securing his position. Networks of informants and complicity permeated the population. Among the groups to be targeted was Iraq's small Jewish community because of its members' alleged or suspected ties with Israel.

In 1980, seeking a role for Iraq as the dominant regional power with international stature, Saddam attacked Iran. During the resulting eight-year war, he drummed up nationalist sentiment to sustain a war of attrition that entailed exceptional human costs. All Iraqi families were affected by the death, injury, trauma and the stigma of prisoners of war. Outnumbered on the battlefield, the Iraqi army used chemical weapons as a regular part of its campaigns. This under-studied war devastated the two countries and is estimated to have cost at least 150,000 Iraqi lives and over 200,000 for Iran, with the numbers rising to close to a million if one also includes the wounded. Thousands of Iranian soldiers remain under medical treatment because of their exposure to chemical weapons during the war.

### **Assaults Against the Kurds**

In 1988, in what was his single most concentrated episode of mass killing, Saddam ordered the gassing of the Kurdish town of Halabja after Iranian soldiers penetrated there, and implemented the “Anfal campaign” against Kurdish villages. Counter-insurgency against the Kurds long pre-dated this period, but Anfal marked a significant intensification of the use of violence. Designating entire areas as prohibited zones, the Iraqi army used chemical weapons to clear Kurds out of their mountain villages, and rounded up and killed many of the men, and forcibly concentrated women and children in harsh conditions of state-controlled settlements. The process of selecting individuals for execution was deliberate, careful and bureaucratic. In the vicinity of the oil-rich area of Kirkuk, a policy of resettling Arabs into Kurdish areas resulted in a significantly more lethal campaign in which women and children were also systematically killed.

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The campaign ended in 1988, one month after the Iran-Iraq war concluded, when the army had completed its geographic sweep of the countryside and the Iraqi leadership deemed its programs successful. They then issued an amnesty for Kurds who had fled to neighboring countries and wished to return. Close to 100,000 Kurds were killed. A possible comparison can be made with the conduct of the civil war in Guatemala, where a longer counter-insurgency was marked by a particularly brutal phase, similarly designating areas for total destruction and forcibly resettling the targeted population in state-controlled “model villages.” Likewise, in this case the campaign ended when the government deemed it eliminated the potential for serious resistance.

### **The 1990-91 War and Its Aftermath**

After a brief respite, Iraq returned to war when Saddam invaded Kuwait, and provoked a U.S.-led war to reverse the aggression. The coalition air campaign intentionally targeted Iraqi core infrastructure, with enormously destructive long-term impacts. The Iraqi army—a central pillar of the regime—was humiliatingly routed. Armed uprisings in both northern and southern Iraq followed. While international attention focused on creating a safe haven in the north for Iraqi Kurds, who thereafter developed internal systems of governance, the Shiite uprising in the south was brutally crushed over 2-3 weeks, followed by a

period of harsh repression. This period witnessed the massive weakening of the Iraqi state and army. Rather than a centralized dictatorship on the model of Stalin, what followed was a criminalized authoritarianism, in which sectarian identity began to be a means of political mobilization.

### **Destruction of livelihoods: The Marsh Arabs**

In April 1992, long-standing Iraqi government programs of controlling the marshes of southern Iraq and their inhabitants— previously cleared in limited ways for oil exploitation (1950s-1970s) and to allow military operations during the Iran-Iraq war—were intensified by a policy of forced displacement of the Ma’dan, often referred to as the “Marsh Arabs,” to dry land where they could be more readily controlled. Some 250,000 Ma’dan were eventually internally displaced and 50,000 fled to Iran. Concentrated destruction of the marshes continued from 1991-1995; in the end, less than

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10% of the wetlands remained. As in other cases of what might be called traumatic, rapid urbanization, such as Darfur, Sudan, a large part of the Ma’dan displaced population chose to stay in their new locations, as delivery of basic services and job opportunities there offered better prospects than a return to traditional livelihoods, which involved routine hardship, and poor health and education.

### **Sanctions, Pauperization and Criminalization**

Iraqi society was transformed in a regressive way during the 1990s. At the time, the major international debate was the claim that the international sanctions regime had killed half a million children. However, the demographic evidence for a major increase in child death rates during this period is meager. It appears that the public distribution system effectively addressed basic public health issues and that the Iraqi government sought to gain propaganda advantage from claims of hugely heightened child death rates. Nonetheless, these figures were widely believed at the time, and the readiness of the U.S. and other Western powers to persist with the sanctions nonetheless, indicates the readiness of those powers to inflict extreme hardship on the Iraqi people. And indeed the sanctions regime did have catastrophic socio-economic impacts: infrastructure destroyed in the conflict was sparingly repaired, the government ruled and enriched itself through criminal networks, and a general pauperization of the population took hold that involved the evisceration of the middle class. The people and institutions that might have been able to provide the foundation for a transition to a democratic and capable state following the removal of Saddam, disappeared. The possibility of a national debate on what it meant to be an Iraqi citizen, or any kind of assessment of the national traumas of the recent past, disappeared.

One striking but little-noticed facet of the 1991-2002 period was that levels of mass killing were much reduced. Saddam’s military capacity, both for internal repression and defense of the nation’s borders, was much less than before. In prison interviews, Saddam and his senior lieutenants declared what US disarmament experts had already concluded after 2003; that Saddam had maintained the myth of a nuclear weapons capability to deter Iran, despite the cost to Iraqi society and his own regime.

## The U.S.-led Invasion

When the U.S. and coalition forces invaded in 2003, Iraqis spent little effort to defend what remained of the former regime. The army melted away. But the potential for a national democratic renewal was lost. While the obvious culprits for this subsequent disaster were the new U.S. rulers and their poor decisions, other important reasons include the emergence of a factionalized and sectarian political culture. Claims of subnational groups to unique victimhood became a primary means of legitimizing claims to state power and the associated capacity to gain access to the nation's oil wealth. Rather than reversing the processes of sectarianism and criminalization that had marked the previous twelve years, the U.S. occupation and the model adopted for constitutional government intensified them.

Patterns of mass violence shifted again in response to the new political dispensation.

The war began with a high spike in killing: Iraq Body Count estimated that 6,700 people were killed in the first 3 weeks of the invasion. From May 2003-February 2006 violence, perpetrated by a range of Iraqi armed actors and coalition forces, increased as resistance against the Coalition and a sectarian-political violence gained momentum. In 2006, U.S. forces largely retreated to their bases and the civil war amongst Iraqi factions intensified, creating a marked peak in lethal violence from February 2006 to August 2007. The war then

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sharply reduced. But the de-escalation occurred without addressing the fundamental questions of how power might be more equitably distributed or justified on something other than sectarian terms.

The decrease in violence in 2007 is often attributed solely to the surge of U.S. forces and the new counterinsurgency tactics adopted by the U.S.

commanders. This reduction, however, is better explained as primarily the result of the changing political calculations of Iraqi actors. Sunni leaders feared being completely outmaneuvered by Shiite factions, which had won control of the government and were increasingly translating this into a socio-political program of ethnically cleansing entire neighborhoods of Baghdad. At the same time, these Sunni leaders realized that their political goals were not well served by an alliance with al-Qaeda elements. This combination of factors produced the "Sunni Awakening." Sunni leaders, notably in Anbar, therefore sought to utilize the U.S. army as an ally, both to remove al-Qaeda and also to reassert themselves vis-à-vis the Shia-led government, which they saw as a proxy for Iran. This coincided with U.S. readiness to pursue a different military strategy. With the ceasefire announced by Moqtada al-Sadr in August 2007, an opening was achieved whereby political goals might be pursued through constitutional political means, principally the electoral process. But following provincial elections in 2009, and with the central government consolidating its control and focused on what was perceived to be a Shiite agenda, violence again

increased in 2010 and remained a threat to civilians thereafter. In total, by 2013 Iraq Body Count had documented 112,789-123,421 civilian deaths.

The data generated by the Iraq Body Count provide an important empirical basis for monitoring and assessing lethal violence in the country, and also for rebutting misleading and politically-motivated claims of numbers of fatalities.

Iraq today has more people on the payroll of security institutions (public and private) than at the height of Baathist power. But the organization of the security sector is markedly different, and the patterns of threat to personal safety are similarly different. Under Saddam, everyday personal safety was not a concern but any suspicion of political opposition was fiercely punished. Today's Iraq is marked by prevalent insecurity without comparable systemic repression.

Meanwhile, the Kurdish areas of northern Iraq have remained relatively quiet. Having established a de facto governing system in the early 1990s and subsequently resolved their major internal differences, the Kurds were well-placed to consolidate their autonomy and distinctive political trajectory after 2003. This they have succeeded in doing, to the extent that the major constraint on separatist ambition is the position of neighboring countries, especially Turkey. Shifting Turkish political calculations as a result of the Arab Spring make it possible to contemplate an independent Kurdish Republic in northern Iraq. However, the issue of Kirkuk remains unresolved, and Iraqis quietly concur that the question of whether Kirkuk should be part of Kurdistan or an Arab Iraqi territory is extremely contentious and a likely spark for violent conflict.

### **Continuity and Rupture across Episodes of Mass Violence**

Across these diverse episodes of war and massive political and collective violence, there are notable continuities. Prominent among these is the priority placed on the military as the key national institution. The country's existence since the 1980s has been framed by armed conflict: with Iran, the U.S. and coalition forces, and internal insurgents. Throughout, the solution to any political problem has been militarized, with political elites (domestic and exiled) cultivating fear as the core national emotion and

source of legitimacy: whether to instill it into everyday state functioning under Saddam or to use it to organize opposing factions in the post-2003 era. Both rulers and ruled lived in a state of constant and ubiquitous fear. With fear comes a sense of statehood defined by exclusion. The question of national identity is addressed primarily in negative terms--who does not belong, who cannot be trusted. The interventions of various regional and international actors

have aggravated this tendency, operating more frequently to close down space in which a broader national conversation might have been had, instead of capitalizing on political openings.

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Significant factors have changed over time. While the ideal of the strong leader prevails, the basis for political leaders to lay claim to this role have shifted, as have their political and institutional capabilities. No leader has been, nor is likely to be, as singly powerful across the entire Iraqi nation as was Saddam Hussein. Most of today's leaders define their constituencies and goals in sub-national terms, and govern through patronage systems. The state itself suffered a long decay, offering any student of strong state/weak state arguments a rich example in how violence occurs under different government capacities—in the end the key consistent factor has been a state unresponsive to its citizens' needs. And while the Baath regime was not sectarian in its self-conception or goals, in its increasingly patrimonial nature, it *de facto* benefitted groups that were associated with the president who were, therefore, Sunni. The retrospective depiction of the Baathist state as a "Sunni state" has colored the politics of the post-Saddam period.

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This leads to one of the strongest recurring themes, that of memory and narratives of victimhood. Powerful new narratives emerged in the 1990s and have been further crafted in the post-Saddam era, which nourish a new sectarian politics and associated violence. These stories do not consist of a comprehensive accounting of the recent history of the Iraqi nation. Instead, contending elites select from the past only what justifies new power claims, without analyzing the diverse roles of both victim and victimizer that groups have played over time. The resulting competition of memory feeds potential for violence: from the Kurds, who tell their past as one of former victims who have now become victors, without recognition of the deep rifts that mark their history; to the Shiites, who view the end of the Saddam era as the opportunity to claim power, carefully forgetting that the Baathist regime was not founded in the name of Sunnis and involved many Shiites at its beginning; to the Sunnis whose resentments of today's power balance and allegation of Iranian ambitions feed distrust of the new government.

Lacking a forum and will to address recent history, let alone the vicissitudes of the present, in a different and more transparent manner, there is a strong likelihood that Iraqi political elites will continue to utilize violence as a political tool, and civilians will continue to suffer.

### **How Does Iraq Impact our Understanding of How Mass Atrocities End?**

The major international policy initiatives developed to respond to mass atrocities, and the threat of mass atrocity, are focused principally on an international toolkit of coercive measures. This includes a host of actions short of military intervention (such as sanctions), but includes extensive discussions of when military interventions should be considered necessary in order to rescue civilians at risk of mass violence, and the range of measures that can be taken to implement such a mission.

Iraq has the sadly important role of providing a test case for a number of these measures. Instances such as the Coalition military campaign to expel Iraq from Kuwait, the subsequent decisions to halt that

campaign and to offer a limited “safe haven” to the Kurds, to impose sanctions and a no-fly-zone (that permitted helicopters), the 2003 invasion, and subsequent political and military measures during the U.S. occupation and the insurgency/civil war, all indicate that domestic political dynamics are the most important determinant of outcomes. Further, such domestic political dynamics are routinely misunderstood and under-estimated by foreign powers considering coercive measures.

None of the favored international measures offer the kind of insights that might have instructed engagement in Iraq in 2006, when, during U.S. occupation, civilians were targeted

in droves. This crucial moment reminds us that mass atrocities, given their organization and systematic nature, are invariably political and require political analysis that is foremost focused on the key actors whose decisions are crucial if we are to understand how violence might de-escalate.

In Iraq, there is consensus that the Kurds will eventually seek independence and there is a reasonable fear that conflict over the borders will result. The sectarian script for violence will likely continue to determine when and where civilians are targeted. It also provides rationale for whoever can control state power to adopt the model of Saddam, without the state capacity to match (for better and worse). And in the marshes, where at least a degree of restoration of the former ecology has been possible, lacking a state capable of exerting national interest, regional water disputes will likely be addressed to Iraq’s disadvantage.

Violence under Saddam took multiple forms: theatrical public displays, targeted repression by a well-organized and pervasive security apparatus, reckless instigation of armed conflict, large-scale targeting of the Kurdish civilian population, harsh repression of uprisings, destruction of livelihoods, and beyond. But his removal, absent an inclusive national reckoning of the history of violence, did not preface a fundamental change in calculations of the usefulness of violence as a political tool. Instead, violence—albeit in new forms—continues to serve as principal mechanism for political contestation. This legacy cannot be undone through more violence. Such an approach only sows the seeds for new forms of assaults, new alliances, and invariably, new victims. With the departure of the U.S. army, and taking a longer perspective on Iraq’s recent history, Iraqis now need an opportunity to engage in a process of national reflection that can help reconstitute a sense of common citizenship and common commitment to non-violent political process.



*Note: Additional information about the How Mass Atrocities End research agenda can be found at <http://fletcher.tufts.edu/World-Peace-Foundation/Activities/How-Mass-Atrocities-End> and additional information about this seminar, including short essays by several participants, can be found on the World Peace Foundation blog, Reinventing Peace, <http://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/>.*

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