

# From the Invasion to the October Protests: Iraq's Search for Stability Caught in U.S.-Iran Crossfire

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## **Iraq against the World: Saddam, America, and the Post-Cold War Order**

*By* Samuel Helfront

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## **Iraq since the Invasion: People and Politics in a State of Conflict**

*Edited by* Keiko Sakai *and* Philip Marfleet

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## **Iraq after the Invasion: From Fragmentation to Rebirth and Reintegration**

*By* Saad N. Jawad

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## Introduction

Iraq was a significant regional power during the Saddam Hussein regime, especially in his first years of reign. However, the Gulf Wars and the end of the Cold War almost wiped-out Iraq's military and political capabilities in the region. Beginning with Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the country was smothered under harsh UN sanctions and invasive weapons inspections. Ironically, the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq gave a huge room for Iranian influence on Iraqi politics, which harbored a U.S.-Iranian battle for influence. The U.S.-Iran competence and successive Iraqi governments' failure to deliver services to Iraqi people met with a heavy backlash as massive anti-government protests that began in 2015 forced the Iraqi governments to introduce reform programs. In particular, the October Protests of 2018 challenged the Iraqi elite's political influence on Iraqi politics and prompted them to lead technocrat governments. In the years since, Iraq's politicians have been trying their utmost to convert Iraq from a conflict-torn and oil-dependent nation to one that is a significant player in the Middle East.

This article will review three books, which describe Iraq's turbulent times in the last 30 years. The three books mentioned in this article are analyzed under four sub-headings: "Saddam and the Post-Cold War Order," "The Invasion of Iraq and Fragmentation," "The Rise of the Shia Politics," and "The Iraqi People's Objection to Elite Bargaining." The themes of the books

are the Iraqi politicians' ambition to roll back Iraq's internal situation and regional position in the Middle East. For those who want to deepen their knowledge of the impacts of the U.S. invasion on Iraq's post-war order, reading the three books together offers a complementary perspective.

Samuel Helfront's *Iraq against the World: Saddam, America, and the Post-Cold War Order* provides deep insights into how Saddam Hussein's regime attempted to undermine America's post-Cold War order. The book consists of 9 chapters, analyzes the U.S.-Iraqi relations in the 1990s through a global lens. By using the Ba'ath Party archives at the Hoover Institution, it shows in detail how Saddam Hussein's regime sought to exploit global outrage over the humanitarian crisis, including the conditions under which the regime succeeded or failed in achieving its foreign policy objectives. About Iraqi influence operations abroad, the book documents how Iraq engaged in a global campaign of political manipulation over journalists, politicians, and UN officials.

*Iraq since the Invasion: People and Politics in a State of Conflict*, edited by Keiko Sakai and Philip Marfleet, addresses the unexpected outcomes of military intervention by the U.S. and its allies in Iraq in 2003. Considering the long-term outcomes of the intervention, the book examines economic collapse, societal disorder, and increased regional conflict in Iraq. The book consists of 10 chapters divided into 4 parts. The first part addresses the political dynamics of

contemporary Iraq and specifically the issues of confessional politics and sectarian agendas. Part 2 examines mass displacement, population movements, and their impacts on Iraqi society. Part 3 considers the (re) making of Iraqi national identity and Kurdish aspirations for secession. The last part analyzes relations with two neighboring states, Iran and Syria, both deeply engaged in Iraqi affairs.

*Iraq after the Invasion: From Fragmentation to Rebirth and Reintegration*, edited by Saad N. Jawad, provides an Iraqi viewpoint of the events that led up to the 2003 American occupation as well as the consequences of its aftermath. The book consists of 5 chapters. The first chapter discusses the situation in Iraq prior to the invasion, revealing what the majority of Iraqis, as well as the Ba'athist leadership, were thinking regarding what was being planned for their country in Washington, London and Tel Aviv. Chapter 2 address the Iraqis' reaction to the invasion and the occupation. Chapter 3 examines the establishment of the constitution, regarded as the main source of division in Iraq. Chapter 4 discusses the chronic Kurdish dilemma in Iraq, finding out what the solution to this dilemma have failed in Iraq. The last chapter explores the needed steps for national reconciliation.

## **Saddam and the Post-Cold War Order**

*Iraq against the World: Saddam, America, and the Post-Cold War Or-*

*der* introduces us to the Ba'ath Party's attempts to influence the post-Cold War world. As a result of using internal Ba'ath Party files to examine Iraqi foreign policy and post-Cold War international history, the book emphasizes that Saddam thought the key to Iraq's salvation was to break up the newly formed international system. To influence global politics, both the Ba'ath Party and the Iraqi Intelligence Service composed political discourse among key states and incorporated economics into their influence campaigns to shape political discourse among key states. Thus, the Iraqi leadership adopted influence operations, also known as information operations, which include the collection of tactical information about an adversary as well as the dissemination of propaganda in pursuit of a competitive advantage over an opponent. This modern influence operation aimed to break the unity at the United Nations Security Council that underpinned the sanctions regime over Iraq.

Besides Iraq, the book attracts attention to factors such as the Balkan wars, NATO expansion, failed humanitarian interventions, and disillusionment with economic globalization that undermined the post-Cold War system. A decade later, many countries, including France and Germany, considered tools such as sanctions, inspections, and no-fly zones in Iraq as extreme and unjust. Thus, Saddam used a combination of influence operations and economic interests to drive a wedge between the U.S. and the United Kingdom on the one

hand and France, Russia, and China on the other. However, the Ba'athists could neither create nor change the fundamental nature of international politics. Therefore, the Ba'athists failed when they attempted to push against the political grain. The U.S. and its main allies did not hesitate to invade Iraq, although Russia, China, and Germany, among others, emerged a fierce opponent of American invasion plans.

### The Invasion of Iraq and Fragmentation

The invasion in 2003 by the U.S. and its allies brought Iraq internal conflict, sectarian hostilities, and ethnic cleansing rather than ensuring stability and prosperity. *Iraq since the Invasion: People and Politics in a State of Conflict* elaborates on U.S.-imposed arrangements that institutionalized confessional politics, a system of sectarian apportionment based upon an exclusive elite pact. Its failure to meet the needs of most of the Iraqis resulted in "the emergence of the ISIS" (p. 38). The post-2003 political settlements built by the U.S. around an exclusive elite bargain played a central part in causing the birth of ISIS in 2006 and driving its resurgence after 2011, as well as the country's fall into civil war between 2004 and 2007. The policies of U.S. President Barack Obama and Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki exacerbated far deeper and longer-running problems. Sectarian appointment or, in Arabic *Muhasasa Ta'ifiya*, vested real power in the leaders of the ethno-sectarian parties

who divided government ministries among themselves and utilized the ministerial resources as patronage to fortify their own political base. Therefore, the political system's failure created after the regime change in 2003 rendered the country a failed state.

In the book, *Iraq after the Invasion: From Fragmentation to Rebirth and Reintegration*, the U.S. and British high officials during the occupation concluded that the Shiites and the Kurds had been oppressed, previously barred from governing Iraq and that the time had come for their power. This is because the old regime was seen as Sunni, discriminating against the Shiites and the Kurds. The Shiite and Kurdish religious parties now had the right to hold sway over Iraq at the expense of the Sunnis. In principle, the above-noted apportionment scheme required the president of the republic to be a Kurd, the prime minister a Shiite, and the speaker of the parliament a Sunni. The neighboring countries' deepening the differences between Iraqi communities or support for local militias to do so aggregated the ethnic and sectarian division. Iran-backed Shiite parties loyal to it on the pretext of thwarting the Sunnis from regaining power. At the same time, the Gulf states turned to the Sunni parties and figures to protect them from the transgressions of the Shiite militias. Israel, on its part, increased its military cooperation and support for the Kurdish Peshmerga forces under the pretext of strengthening the Kurdish regional government against

any attempts by any Arab government to regain its influence in the region and against Iran's influence in Iraq and Syria. At this point, Saad N. Jawad's *Iraq after the Invasion* argues that this external "help" was deepening the divisions inside Iraq, with incitement and counter-incitement (p. 181). Hence, sectarian division became the main feature of Iraq after the occupation. These divisions were encouraged by the local elements that have ruled Iraq with either the covert or the overt support of the occupation forces since 2003.

The U.S.-imposed political system empowered Shia-affiliated political actors and emphasizes sectarian identity among Sunnis. Jawad's *Iraq after the Invasion* emphasizes that all Sunnis were regarded as Ba'athists or "terrorists" (p. 51). In *Iraq since the Invasion*, one can see that the exclusive elite bargain divided Iraq's policy along ethno-sectarian lines as well as excluding and demonizing the Sunni section of Iraqi society. Between 2003 and 2014, regional powers exploited the Sunni-Shia tension in Iraq owing to worries about the extension of Iranian power amid the rise of Shia-centric political actors in Iraq. Since the end of the war against the ISIS, Iraq has experienced sectarianism receded in Iraqi political alignments and political contestation. *Iraq since the Invasion* argues, "Sectarianism is embedded in Iraqi society as a determinative of Iraq's political system" (p. 22). The success of the Sadr Movement led by Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, with the support of secular groups, marked a departure from

previous elections dominated by parties welcoming confessional agendas.

The constitution, formulated after the invasion, stipulated that Iraq was a federal state. It also recognized that the Kurdish area, which had been a de facto autonomous zone since 1991, was a federal region that was bestowed upon exercising executive, legislative, and judicial powers as well as possessing security forces. Actually, the de facto autonomous Kurdistan area emerged in 1991 following the unilateral withdrawal of the Iraqi Army. The front line between them, called the Green Line, constitutes the Southern border of the autonomous area. Those areas to the South of the Green Line are usually named the disputed territories. *Iraq since the Invasion* outlines, "According to Article 140 of the constitution in 2005, the attribution of these territories was supposed to be settled by the end of 2007" (p. 238). Nevertheless, the issue of the disputed territories has stayed in limbo so far. Therefore, territorial issues and other unresolved disputes, such as oil, destabilize Iraq and the KRG.

Amid the battle against ISIS, the KRG declared that it would organize a referendum for the separation of Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Saad Jawad's *Iraq after the Invasion* reveals that some foreign advisers had suggested to Massoud Barzani that "more than 80 countries would back the outcome of the referendum immediately, with other countries to later follow suit and change their negative position or, at least, remain neutral" (p. 147). In fact, re-

gionally and internationally, no country supported the referendum except for Israel. Türkiye and Iran, the two major countries bordering Kurdistan Region of Iraq, had warned the Kurdish regional administration against holding the referendum. Barzani's insistence on the referendum resulted from the deep political division inside the region to ensure his remaining as president despite the expiration of his legal term of office (p. 148). At this stage, Barzani's inability to defy the central government and impose his conditions based on the referendum thwarted his agenda, worsening his position. The sudden collapse and retreat of the Peshmerga from the disputed areas was a shock for Barzani and widespread anti-corruption demonstrations were observed in most Kurdish towns.

Because of the referendum failure, Barzani resigned from his post as president of the KRG. He lost everything, including his unchallenged position among the other Kurdish parties and all the privileges he owned as ruler of a de facto independent state, the presence of international delegations and dignitaries in Erbil without prior approval from Baghdad, and the right to export oil worth billions of dollars. Not only did he lose all these privileges, but he was also isolated internally, regionally, and internationally. Saad N. Jawad's *Iraq after the Invasion* reveals that the arrival of the new Iraqi prime minister (end of 2018), Adil Abdul Mahdi, an old friend and colleague of Barzani, was the last chance for Barzani to avoid total collapse. Nevertheless, Barzani

was unable to take advantage of this opportunity to repair his relations with the other Kurdish political parties; instead, he made decisions that implied his continued intention to dominate the Iraqi Kurdish region despite the rights and desires of other political parties to share power with the KDP (p. 154). At the end of May 2019, he announced his son-in-law and nephew Nigervan Barzani as the new president of the KRG and his son Masrou as the new prime minister of the region, which revived the struggle with the other Kurdish political parties in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

## The Rise of the Shia Politics

The Shia clergy has been one of the most influential actors within the Iraqi political arena since the end of the war in 2003, especially among the Shia population as a whole. During the ISIS resurgence in Iraq, Muqtada al-Sadr reemerged as a significant figure in Iraqi politics. *Iraq since the Invasion* ascribes the rise of al-Sadr's movement in Iraq during 2014-2018 to the fact that there has been a worldwide trend towards movements of the urban poor demanding transparency from plutocratic elected elites. The Sadrist Movement was the winner of the 2018 and 2021 parliament elections. Al-Sadr had been able to re-establish himself at the center of demonstrations against the political status quo in Iraq by the end of 2015, as he had remobilized his old supporters through the protest movement. Against the backdrop of anti-government protests, he promised to elimi-

nate corruption and insecurity by adopting a populist agenda for change as opposed to the confessional and partisan administrations of the past.

Iraq has been dealing with its relations with other regional countries in a different way in the post-Saddam era. Iran has tried to maximize its influence over the Shia-dominated governments in Baghdad and among the Kurdish politicians as well in order to maximize its influence. A number of Arab leaders were annoyed by the supremacy of Iraqi Shias and Iran. *Iraq since Invasion* describes their worries as a declaration by the former Saudi intelligence chief, Turki al-Faisal, stating, “The United States has delivered Iraq on a golden plate to Iran” (p. 281). As a result, the U.S. has censured Iraq’s Arab neighbors for failing to form relations with the post-Saddam Iraqi government in order to counter Iranian influence in the country. Iranian leaders followed a policy to push U.S. forces out of Iraq, prevent cross-border encroachment by armed insurgents, and the inviolability of borders under the 1975 Algiers Agreement. Indeed, Iraqi leaders see this agreement as a treaty between Saddam and the Shah and, thus, desire to revise this agreement. Aside from this, Iran is doing its utmost to keep Iraq as an ally in its regional rivalry with the U.S. In the context of the Syrian uprising, Iran and Iraq have played a significant role in consolidating the ties between them. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia, as a traditional protector of Sunni Islam, aimed to keep Iraq out of the Iranian orbit by backing anti-Iranian Sunni

politicians and militias in Iraq. On the other hand, a revival of Shia institutions in Iraq has posed a challenge to the authority of the Iranian clergy and the supremacy of Shia leaders in Qom, the center of Iranian religious orthodoxy.

In *Iraq since Invasion* it has been clear that there has historically been a brutal rivalry between Iraq and Syria because of their geographical proximity, their shared Arab identity, and their similar experiences in state formation. A warm relationship has been forged between the two countries since the invasion of Iraq and the Syrian Uprising that began in 2011. It is important to emphasize that Syrian policy toward Iraq after the fall of Saddam not only opposed U.S. policy toward Iraq but also sought influence among Baghdad’s newly formed elite after the fall of Saddam. When the al-Maliki government was in power, Syria’s attempts to gain influence in Iraq were met with a heavy backlash. Even so, the Syrian uprising caused Iraqi leaders to support President Bashar al-Assad even though they feared that a Sunni Salafist regime could replace him in the aftermath of the uprising. In the years that have followed, Iraq has been one of Syria’s foremost supporters in its attempt to become an integral part of the Arab world.

### **The Iraqi People’s Objection to Elite Bargaining**

Following the deterioration of socioeconomic conditions created by the

post-2003 government, protest rallies and demonstrations were held throughout the country, with protestors accusing the government of failing to provide basic needs such as power, water, public health, regular salaries, and blaming the government for unemployment and corruption. The first popular protest movements were seen in Sunni-dominated areas of Iraq before the Arab Uprising began. Since the beginning of the uprising, criticism of corrupt officials in the local administration has quickly spread to the large cities of Baghdad and Basra, as well as deep intervention from the ruling parties. Since the beginning of 2015, there has been a growing conflict between demonstrators and government authorities. There was a beginning of the protests with civic-secular groups, including religious-based political groups such as the Sadr Movement, which led to the formation of vast networks of protesters.

Once Iran and the Iraqi allies thwarted Ibadi's bid to gain a second term, it was agreed that Adil Abdul Mahdi be selected as a new (conciliatory) prime minister. Jawad's *Iraq after the Invasion* explicates Abdul Mahdi's failings, which erupted the anti-government demonstrations against the exclusive elite pact. He was subordinated to Iran and its allies in Iraq (especially the PMF), failed to provide minimal services to the majority of the Iraqi people, and finally could not block the enormous size of corruption inside his government. These facts were accompanied by the sharp drop in oil prices, which led to

a substantial economic problem for Iraq. Abdul Mahdi remained a caretaker prime minister until May 2020, when a consensus on nominating Mustafa al-Kadhimi to become the new prime minister occurred. U.S. pressure and the tacit approval of Iran secured Kadhimi's selection. Kadhimi played a conciliatory role up to the 2021 Iraqi parliament elections. In October 2022, a political agreement among the Shia coalition known as the Coordination Framework and major Kurdish and Sunni Arab parties paved the way for the al-Sudani government to form. Based on the political demands made by each of the allies, the al-Sudani government declared its government program promising to combat corruption, create jobs, address poverty, reform the economic and financial systems, and improve public services. The government program faced domestic and external difficulties in implementing it. The al-Sudani government deepened economic ties with the neighboring countries to set the stage for political stability in Iraq. Nonetheless, his government suffers the deleterious effects of outside interference in its domestic affairs and needs international and regional partners to achieve much-needed political, economic, and social development.

## Conclusion

One of the three works examined here discusses Iraqi activities abroad undermining support for international sanctions on Iraq after 1991. The others analyze key aspects of change in

Iraq since the 2003 invasion. While confessional politics and sectarian agendas would play second fiddle in contemporary Iraq, it is expected that the (re)making of Iraqi national identity amid protests would become visible in Iraq in the coming decades. As such, these three books are significant contributions to literature. One of them draws on the vast archive of internal Ba'athist documents captured after the 2003 invasion. The others include a wealth of detail on political, social, and cultural change, and on the experiences of Iraqis during long years of upheaval. It will be of value to researchers and students interested in international relations, development studies, and Middle East politics.

The book *Iraq against the World: Saddam, America, and the Post-Cold War Order* illustrates how relatively small countries can play important roles in world affairs, highlighting the central role of the Middle East over the last three decades. From this standpoint, the book is a landmark one not only the Middle East scholarship but also scholars of U.S. foreign policy. *Iraq after the Invasion: From Fragmentation*

*to Rebirth and Reintegration*, which consists of 5 chapters, discusses how the invasion and occupation of Iraq resulted in the dismantling of the state and the destruction of all the structures and processes of government. As a complementary book of Iraqi activities abroad, the book presents an Iraqi viewpoint of the events that led to the invasion. In order to strengthen our understanding of contemporary Iraq, it underlines that the sectarian and ethnic quota-based policies caused successive blows to the laws and institutions by disintegrating the Iraqi state.

Finally, *Iraq since the Invasion: People and Politics in a State of Conflict*, which consists of 10 chapters, explores the rise and fall of Iraq's confessional leaders, the emergence of a popular movement for reform, and the demands of young Iraqis focused on revolutionary change. However, a criticism of the book is that the phenomenon of the anti-government protests, beginning in 2015 but culminating in 2018, is not adequately addressed in the light of recent political and legitimate developments. ■