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Submission to the Iraq Inquiry

**What were the causes and consequences of Iraq's descent into
violence after the initial invasion?**

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Introduction: Three Hypotheses

Debates concerning the causes of Iraq's descent into violence have tended to group around three sets of opinions, with each attracting vocal adherents.

The first view is that the causes of Iraq's descent into violence can be blamed largely on the invasion and subsequent occupation. This scenario then sees violence as being an expression of nationalist fervour in the face of external aggression, and the qualitative and quantitative degradation of violence as tied directly to the mistakes made by occupation authorities in the immediate post invasion environment.

The second set of opinions may seem to contradict the first, but what it describes should rather be seen as existing in parallel. The general hypothesis is that Iraq, and Iraqis, were as much to blame for the descent into violence as the dynamics promulgated by occupation, if not more so. This scenario portrays Iraqi society as inherently divided and divisive – largely along sectarian (Sunni – Shi'a) and ethnic (mainly Arab – Kurd) lines, and Iraqi political culture as being too underdeveloped following decades of Ba'thist rule to take on the load of democratically governing the country in the post-authoritarian setting.

By failing to realise this before the invasion of the country, Coalition policy-planners entered Iraq with unrealistic expectations and the wrong plans for the situations that subsequently unfolded, which in effect constitutes the third and final set of causative factors. Rather than establishing structures, procedures, and most importantly security for the nascent Iraqi state, the descent into violence not only was a *reaction* to an Occupation, it was *facilitated* by Coalition institutions and their mistakes. These mistakes were not only in the domain of events that resulted in the tragic deaths of civilians – formative though these undoubtedly were; they also included policy-related mistakes in how the Coalition in general, and the UK Government in the governorates of the south specifically, planned to act 'the day after' the invasion. The lack of joined-up thinking between key Whitehall departments served to provide a permissive environment in the form of geographic, political, and social space which could be utilised by Iraqi insurgents and external actors keen to exploit the situation for their own ends.

In this submission, I argue that Iraq's descent into violence is complex and cannot be explained by any one set of reasons, nor can any set of reasons be wholly or even partially discounted. Indeed, each set of hypotheses has a degree of explanatory value and, taken together, combine to present a scenario explaining the emergence of an insurgency with an initially organized nationalist (and coloured largely with Ba'thist rhetoric) core, which was facilitated in its consolidation and expansion by the inability of the Coalition, combined with some serious mistakes, to undertake actions appropriate to the post-invasion setting. In a political environment largely misunderstood and mismanaged by the Coalition, the insurgency rapidly turned into insurgencies and became diffuse and amorphous making the task of providing security exceptionally difficult.

This Coalition failure also resulted in the division of political authority in the nascent state, with power devolving to multiple poles leading to indecision on issues of critical importance to Iraq's future development. These indecisions continue to haunt

Iraq today and have made the state exceptionally fragile to the extent that the future of the country can still not be discussed in concrete terms.

The remainder of this submission presents two causes of Iraq's descent into violence. These are the failures of Coalition planners in the period before the war to either build an accurate analysis of the characteristics of Iraqi society and how they would develop in a post-authoritarian environment, and the unsuitability of Coalition plans in the immediate post-invasion setting. These two causes are linked, with the first focuses upon the nature of socio-political mobilization in Iraq, the second upon the ability of the Coalition in general and British institutions in particular, to prevent the descent into violence and embark upon stabilization and developmental initiatives necessary for reconstruction and rehabilitation to take place.

A Catastrophic Misjudgement of Iraqi Socio-Political Mobilization

A debate of considerable magnitude exists among specialists working on Iraq, and this debate focuses upon the dynamics of Iraqi socio-political mobilization. This debate is as old as the state of Iraq itself, and largely pitches those who view Iraqi political development as a linear process through the twentieth century that witnessed the emergence of a vibrant, civic, form of nationalism, against those who consider the local conditions of Iraqi society – and particularly in terms of religious association and ethnic identity – as perennial features of the Iraqi socio-political landscape.

Within the academic literature on Iraq, the first vision of the emergence of national cohesion, albeit against the backdrop of authoritarian/totalitarian government, proved to be dominant until 2003, and has only been questioned following the subsequent rapid development of sectarian conflict between 2004 and 2007. This vision presents a modern, in many ways Westernized (or '-ing') Iraqi polity and state: one in which an active middle class transcended the divides imposed by religion and ignored the differences of ethnicity, and which saw the Iraqi state invest heavily in education, healthcare, and public service provision. This process benefited from the impact of socialism on civic solidarity and the transformative role of the military as the 'new middle class'. It was also strengthened by the general impact of modernity brought about largely, though not solely, through Iraq's oil revenue. It remained – juxtaposed awkwardly alongside an understanding of the brutal nature of the Ba'th regime – the dominant pre-war mantra concerning the characteristics of Iraqi socio-political life.

Warnings could certainly be taken from events in Iraq from the 1980s onwards that this view was at best incomplete, or maybe wrong. The state-designed ethnic cleansing of the rural areas of Kurdistan in the late 1980s (the Anfal Campaign),¹ the brutal suppression of the southern *intifadah* in 1991 (which had very distinctive Shi'a references), and the equally ruthless quashing of the Kurdish *rapareen* suggested that the notion of civic nationalism may be stronger in the minds of Western intellectuals than it was in the minds of Iraqis themselves. But the possibility of a fragmented Iraqi polity containing various, perhaps contending notions of Iraqi nationalism (or even non-Iraqi nationalisms, in the case of some Kurds) was an unattractive proposition for the West to embrace, whereas the post-liberal belief in the unitary nature of Iraqi

¹ See Middle East Watch, *Genocide in Iraq: The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds*. New York: Human Rights Watch, 1983; Joost Hiltermann, *A Poisonous Affair: America, Iraq and the Gassing Halabja*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

nationalist aspirations fitted Western planning perfectly. It was simply too inconvenient to plan for a situation that was characterized by disunity, disorder, and multiple visions of the future, compared to hoping – forlornly as it turned out – for some homogenous movement with which to interact with and around which implement a one-nation building project and resurrect the institutions of state.

Western social science and scholarship contributed significantly to this failing, with a view of Iraqi unity largely being accepted as a truism by Coalition planners before the event, and by CPA figures in the early days of the post-regime change period. Indeed, the CPA seemed to fall foul of romanticizing Iraq's undeniably glorious historical roots and suggest, just as Saddam had done, that the historical memories of modern Iraq somehow endowed the modern state construct with a sense of unity and civic identity – irrespective of the fact that the sectarian dynamic had been a powerful factor in Iraqi politics for several centuries.² Why this should have been the case is a very important question to ask. The ability of states to homogenise the identities of peoples through a variety of methods (coercive and otherwise) had been widely written about comparatively, with reference made to Iraq,³ and the experience of state collapse in the former USSR and in the Balkans had illustrated clearly the tendency of post-authoritarian states to succumb to localised political dynamics – particularly when ethnic faultlines were involved – and how quickly communal hatreds, perhaps of modern origin, could quickly take on the rhetoric and power of more ancient, even mythical, differences.⁴

But Iraq, for these specialists, was somehow different. Save for the Kurds, who were seen to be isolated, dominated by ethnic entrepreneurs, short-sighted in the geopolitical vision for supposed secession (which was never articulated by any Kurdish leader), and influenced heavily by Western interventionism, Iraqis were seen to be some sort of mass post-ethno/sectarian liberal individualists, with religious structures (such as those of the Shi'a establishment), tribal structures, modern political organizations (such as the Ba'th Party), and ethnically-based movements (and particularly those of the Kurds, but also including Assyrians and Turkmens), being used as evidence of the cosmopolitan nature of Iraq, but not of anything more concerning for the post-Saddam environment.⁵

The survival of these views was largely a product of the constraints around undertaking research in Iraq. It would have been useful to have had in place before the invasion a body of specialists advising the governments of the Coalition that had meaningful and balanced research experience inside Iraq. There was, as far as I can

² Eric Davis and Amatzia Baram present particularly useful analyses of the way in which historical memories were used by the Ba'th regime in the construction of a nationalist discourse. See Amatzia Baram, *Culture, History and Ideology in the Formation of Ba'thist Iraq, 1968-1989*. London: Macmillan/St Antony's College Oxford, 1991; Eric Davis, *Memories of State: Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

³ On the homogenisation of peoples, see Heather Rae, *State Identities and the Homogenisation of Peoples*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. For comparative work including Iraq, see Andreas Wimmer, *Nationalist Exclusion and Ethnic Conflict: Shadows of Modernity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

⁴ For the way in which ancient myths and symbols feed 'modern hatreds', see Stuart Kaufmann, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001.

⁵ See Gareth Stansfield, 'Divide and heal,' *Prospect*, May 2006, pp. 22-27.

discern, no Western researcher who had enjoyed the ability to undertake social science research focusing on identity and political mobilization inside Iraq, outside the Kurdistan Region, in the 1990s.⁶ Indeed, even if a researcher had gained unfettered access to respondents on this subject, it would have been a futile exercise due to the state's pernicious and omnipotent presence over its population. What would have been of tremendous interest, of course, would have been to hear the voice of the middling and provincial Iraqis – of those people not part of the political games of Baghdad and the occupation. They were a largely silent majority living in the major towns and cities other than Baghdad, and in the thousands of smaller towns and villages across the country. Critically, it was in these spaces that the new politics of Iraq would form following Saddam's removal – and this was the politics of the local.

Important research was certainly done at this time, and especially on the sanctions regime, that yielded valuable insights into the damage being done to Iraqi society and the relative balance between state and society.⁷ Yet it remained the case that the only possible way Western academics could gain access to Iraq was through the offices of the regime, and this of course limited what could be done and who could be seen, and thereby served to colour analyses that would feed into how those responsible for planning the rehabilitation of the post-Saddam state understood the political landscape.

The result was that the Coalition entered Iraq with the wrong plan for the wrong country.

Enter the Coalition: Creating a Permissive Environment for Agencies of Insecurity

Insurgency was not a notable feature of Iraq under Saddam, and violence was very much the preserve of the state. Yet both quickly emerge and spread in the post-war period. Whichever way the origins of this violence is described, it remains the case that, under Saddam, it did not happen yet under the Coalition, it did – and this surely constitutes an important problem to address. In so doing, it is useful to refer to Kenneth Waltz's thesis of anarchy being the permissive cause of war – in an interstate sense – and refocus this to consider the permissive causes of violence and insurgency, that transmogrified into 'civil wars', in Iraq.⁸

⁶ Due to the autonomous existence of the Kurdistan Region from 1991, some academics managed to undertake research there, although their work was focused wholly on developments inside the Kurdistan Region itself, without reference to conditions in the remainder of Iraq. As such, this body of literature is an important resource for understanding specifically Kurdish politics at this time, but cannot be used to infer wider Iraqi patterns. See, in particular, Michael Gunter, *The Kurdish Predicament in Iraq: A Political Analysis*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999; Denise Natali, *International Aid, Regional Politics, and the Kurdish Issue after the Gulf War*. Abu Dhabi: Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research, 1999; Andrea Fischer-Tahir, "Wir gaben viele Märtyrer." *Widerstand und kollektive Identitätsbildung in Irakisch-Kurdistan*. Münster: UNRAST Verlag, 2003. Gareth Stansfield, *Iraqi Kurdistan: Political Development and Emergent Democracy*. London: Routledge, 2003.

⁷ See, for example, Tim Niblock, "Pariah States" and Sanctions in the Middle East: Iraq, Libya, Sudan. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002; Sarah Graham-Brown, *Sanctioning Saddam: The Politics of Intervention in Iraq*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2002.

⁸ Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1965. Also see Andrew Linklater 'The transformation of political community: E. H. Carr, critical theory and international relations,' *Review of International Studies*, 1997, Vol. 23, pp. 321-338. For a

In short – the unpreparedness of the Coalition was largely to blame for creating an environment that permitted insurgent activities and facilitated the consolidation of power into the hands of communal-based (whether sectarian, ethnic, tribal, or local) actors. As I have argued above, the way in which Iraqi political culture, socio-political character, and political mobilization was believed to be, and would be following Saddam’s removal, was proved catastrophically wrong. This misreading of Iraqi society and politics fed into the policy-planning process of the US and UK, resulting in some core assumptions being made. The inaccuracy of these assumptions would turn the Coalition from having proactive to reactive agency and create a situation in which the Coalition was always several steps behind insurgent groups, political actors outside the process mandated by the Coalition, and external actors pursuing their own interests.

The first assumption was that a regime-change would do exactly what it said on the tin – it would change the regime, and everyone would then be happy. Glibness aside, there was a genuine belief that the isolation that characterised the regime by 2003 would mean that its removal could be done in a largely surgical fashion and with Iraqi society – again believed to be relatively homogeneous in terms of its civic outlook – being largely undisturbed and, in the main, welcoming of the liberators.⁹ There seems to have been little attempt to understand what dynamics would be set in train by a highly violent and externally organized destruction of the Ba’thist regime (which was still seen by most Iraqis as legitimate, irrespective of its penchant for extreme violence) and, leading from this, no attempt to plan for how to cope with and shape (or even comprehend the force of) the dynamics which arose.

The second assumption, which is closely related to the first, was that the Iraqi State would survive the invasion, that institutions would be quick to recover from the shock of regime change, that civil servants would remain at their posts, and that key elements necessary for ensuring the efficacy of transitional governance – and especially the police and judiciary – would continue largely as they were and enjoy the legitimacy that they had previously held. In effect, the regime would be decapitated, but the body of the state would remain.

These assumptions proved to be wrong, with the result being that the post-invasion setting was unpredictable, unstable, and often unmanageable. In terms of finding scapegoats, the failings of the Coalition Provisional Authority and the decisions made by Paul Bremer during the initial post-invasion period are often mentioned, and with good reason. But by the time of Bremer’s arrival in Baghdad, the die had largely been cast for Iraq’s descent into violence. In the immediate aftermath of the conflict, power had devolved chaotically, authoritarianism had been removed and this sudden release of pressure created new political, social, and economic spaces in which ‘freedom’ could be exploited in a range of constructive, and also deconstructive, ways. Politics, in effect, had become local very quickly and those pre-existing organizations that had resources, networks, information, militias and also legitimacy became the new sovereign powers in the parts of the country in which they were based.

breakdown of Iraq’s ‘civil wars’, see Gareth Stansfield, ‘Accepting Realities in Iraq,’ *Middle East and North Africa Programme Briefing Paper*, Chatham House, May 2007.

⁹ For an account of the regime ‘decapitation thesis’, see Toby Dodge, ‘Iraqi Transitions: From Regime Change to State Collapse,’ *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 4/5, 2005, pp. 705-721.

A now familiar pattern began to emerge across the map of Iraq – and it was one that served to illustrate the fallacy of the coherence of ‘one’ Iraqi nationalism. In Shi’a-dominated areas, the authority of the multi-faceted religious establishment and the *wakil* networks of prominent ayatollahs began to make their presence felt through the providing of information, security, and provisions. The militias of the organized Shi’a parties, and particularly the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI – later to be known as the Islamic Supreme Council for Iraq – ISCI) became the *de facto* arbiters of violence, with the *jaish al-Mahdi* militia loyal to Muqtada al-Sadr performing the same task in the Shi’a-dominated areas of Baghdad.¹⁰ In areas to the north, outside Baghdad, in Salahadin, Diyala and Ninevah provinces, prominent families and tribes moved to assert their authority – with patronage coming from a array of funders, including former Ba’thists, Sunni Islamists, Al-Qaeda affiliated groups, or the Coalition itself. The funders of the political system in Sunni Arab-dominated areas would change often between 2003 and 2008, but the pattern of power being held by local actors remained unchanged. In the Kurdistan Region, the hegemony of the two principal Kurdish parties – the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan – remained absolute and, with the failure of the Turkish Grand National Assembly to allow the US to open a northern front against Saddam, had been elevated suddenly to being prized partners of the regime-change enterprise. The Kurds had now arrived as a major, formative, player in the future of Iraqi politics.

Unfit for Purpose?

Turning to the South, the UK military was faced with a situation that had not been envisaged, or even planned for. In essence, the problem faced by UK forces was simply that the military was not set up to administer territory as the deposed regime had done, or to enforce order across the theatre. Their structure was set up primarily for war-fighting, with civilian agencies then tasked with interacting with departments of the Iraqi state during the subsequent phase of reconstruction and rehabilitation. But, in an increasingly lawless environment, well-meaning developmental projects as planned by DFID and other non-military departments could not be undertaken. Of course, even in a comprehensively organized stabilisation campaign, counter-insurgency would be expected to be factored into planning, particularly as it is logical to expect that security should be achieved before sectoral rehabilitation could take place. Yet the UK forces, perhaps because of the inaccurate assessment of Iraqi socio-political structures that had percolated through the British government, were not prepared for the severity of the insurgency that they now faced and they were in no way ready to contend with the challenge posed by the emergence of what was a disparate, but often highly organized, insurgency.

This is particularly concerning when it seems to be the case that UK pre-war assessments were anticipating some form of post-invasion resistance to be mounted by the *Fedayeen Saddam*. Irrespective of these warnings, the UK was not set up in the slightest to perform counter-insurgency operations. There was no transitional policing system, no judicial system, not even facilities to detain people. The UK was also

¹⁰ For information regarding the emergence and consolidation of Shi’a parties in Iraq, see Sajjad Rizvi, *Shi’i Religious Institutions in Iraq and Politics*. Report prepared for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2009.

hamstrung, as was the Coalition in general, by the administrative compartmentalization of Iraq which was built upon the logic of planners in London and Washington rather than on any understanding of how situations in Iraq developed. It was, for example, impossible to separate Basra from events that would happen in Baghdad or Najaf, and they would come back to target the UK in second-order repercussions, such as what happened in Al-Amara in May 2004, following disturbances in Najaf.

The quick growth of violence in 2004 onwards was largely caused by the activities of remnant *fedayeen Saddam* units (which was not so surprising) but quickly took on a new dynamic of Iraqis killing Iraqis, which was something of a shock to military leaders in Iraq.¹¹ This led to a spate of decisions being made that saw the nascent post-invasion Iraqi security forces being expanded extremely quickly, based upon the assumption that Iraqis policing themselves would allow the further removal from the scene of the presence of occupying forces. This expansion was immense in scale and undertaken in a very short space of time, placing quantity as the primary measure of success rather than quality of training and the force being effective, reliable and, perhaps most important, professional and non-partisan. This strategy failed. Rather than a force being created that could satisfy the domestic security demands, the strategy resulted in a rapid ‘militia-ization’ of the coercive arm of an exceptionally fragile and heavily fragmented transitional state. In effect, the wrong army (or armies) and the wrong police had been created. Rather than securing and stabilizing Iraq and being a set of institutions that represented the unity of the nation (as had ironically been the case under Saddam), the strategy fed into the further sectarianisation and communalisation of the country. Rather than enhancing social and political solidarity, the new security forces rent apart those remaining ties that bound communities together and instead reinforced the cleavages of sect, ethnicity, class, and power.

Foreign Jihadists?

Among members of the Iraqi political elite, two voices – one public, one private – could be heard. The political elite that had been put in place following the invasion were, at least publicly, unwilling to accept that the descent into violence and the increasingly endemic problem of insecurity were of ‘Iraqi’ origin. Privately, though, some of them would say acknowledge that the societal divisions were deeper than even they had thought.

The Iraqi government and the Coalition had a vested interest in shifting the blame for the descent into violent to non- (or ‘anti-’) Iraqi forces, and particularly on the destabilizing nature of a foreign forces – which has recently been aired again by Prime Minister Maliki following the recent terrible bombings in Baghdad. The term ‘foreigners’ did not only refer to occupying forces, however. Indeed, Iraq had by 2005 become a magnet for foreign fighters from across the region and beyond, attracting those who sought to confront the US particularly, and by association the UK, as part of a religious confrontation. Iraq had also become a territory in which a war-by-proxy was being fought between different neighbouring states and where regional powers also had to secure their own national interests. Yet the ‘foreign fighter’ dynamic, while dangerous and capable, could never fully explain the extent and nature of

¹¹ See, for example, the statements of General George Casey in the mid-2004 period.

violence in Iraq. If insurgents from Saudi Arabia – considered by many to be an important source – are considered, it seems unlikely that the numbers who ventured north exceeding 1,500 between 2003 and 2008.¹² Instead, the predominant drivers of the insurgencies (and, by 2004, the insurgency had bifurcated into a range of different insurgencies opposed to the government, the occupation, and increasingly to each other)¹³ were Iraqi and were motivated by different conceptions of Iraq's future and their place within it.

This combination of state and non-state pressures combined with the already social, religious, and political structures of Iraqi domestic setting to create a complex of insecurity that proved impossible for UK planners to ever come to terms with. This devolution of authority and the emergence of a myriad of constantly changing political actor existing largely independently from the state then caused local problems, local crime, and local security issues. Combined with the lack of competency of the state, this explosion of the post-authoritarian society atomized political life, with day-to-day existence in Iraq becoming more Hobbesian in its nature, and tremendously difficult to deal with from the perspective of the UK forces.

Increasingly, the view held by Coalition governments at this time – irrespective of what was being reported from the field – was that the Occupation was the lodestone of insecurity. This opinion was shared by the Iraqi government, which still could not publicly accept that violence had a significant Iraqi component. It was also the mantra of the vocal anti-Occupation lobby in the West. With hindsight, it was therefore of no surprise that the Coalition accelerated the process of building Iraq's institutions of state, but by imposing top down solutions rather than those that required longer periods of democratic culture development, such as some projects initiated by the CPA that focused on democratic institution building at the neighbourhood level. The resultant rushed transfer of Iraqi sovereignty from the CPA to the Iraqi government then only served to further consolidate the now gaping fissures in Iraqi political life and society, while exposing the new and dysfunctional state to the immense pressure of bringing order to Iraq without having any unity of purpose among the leading Iraqi political entities.

¹² See Thomas Hegghammer, 'Saudis in Iraq: Patterns of Radicalization and Recruitment,' *Cultures and Conflicts*, English documents, 2008. <http://www.conflicts.org/index10042.html>.

¹³ See Gareth Stansfield, 'Accepting Realities in Iraq,' *Middle East Programme Briefing Paper*, Chatham House, May 2007.