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IRAQ 20 YEARS AFTER THE INVASION

Twenty years after the invasion of Iraq, CMI reflects on the lessons learned from the war, highlighting the importance of national ownership, political dialogue and inclusion in ensuring a stable political system.

Baghdad, the Iraqi capital bursting with life with its busy city traffic, grand buildings and crowded cafés along the shores of the legendary Tigris River, appears to have somehow recovered from the war years. What is most striking is the resilience and determination of the Iraqi people to move on with their lives, despite the suffering they endured over the past decades. Yet, the memories of the 2003 invasion by the US-led Coalition Forces – and of what followed – are still vivid. Most Iraqis experienced trauma and losses as war became a daily reality.

There are countless tragic stories of ordinary people who lost children, siblings, spouses, neighbours and friends during the invasion, and the sectarian war that followed. The wounds of war, both physical and psychological, still affect most Iraqis, including the younger generation. Despite having become a far more free society, Iraq's future is tinged with lingering doubts amid the country's complex post-conflict environment. Arguably, the world, and the Middle East have not yet recovered from the legacy of the war.

As 2023 marks the 20th anniversary of the invasion, many focus on the lessons of failed policymaking and how the war ended for the people who lived through it. In this paper, CMI Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation wishes to contribute to this debate from the perspective of the peacemaking and mediation community.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- A foreign-imposed regime change is doomed to fail whenever state-building efforts are the outcome of invasion and occupation rather than the result of a peace settlement.
- The composition of the post-2003 Iraqi government reflected a clear division of political blocks along ethnic and sectarian lines sowed the seeds of sectarianism and made Iraq vulnerable to external influence.
- A new stable and safe political system can only be forged from within—by Iraqis for Iraqis.

CMI has a long history of activity in Iraq. In 2003, President Martti Ahtisaari headed an investigation into the bombing of UN headquarters in Baghdad, which killed 22 people, including UN Special Representative for Iraq Sérgio Vieira de Mello. Since then, CMI continued its work in the country with civil society and policy makers. In 2008, Martti Ahtisaari organised a conference in Finland bringing together Iraqi Shi'ite and Sunni Arab leaders, as well as Kurds, with the goal of ending violence in Iraq. Gathering representatives across the sectarian and ethnic divides aimed at fostering national reconciliation. The Foundation continued to support local efforts towards reconciliation, peace and stability through informal dialogue and expert support to the Iraqi National Reconciliation Commission between

2015 and 2017, resulting in a national reconciliation strategy submitted to Prime Minister Haidar Al Abadi's cabinet for consideration. Most recently, CMI has been promoting discussions on issues pertaining to regional relations, including trans-boundary water resources between Iraq and its neighbours.

CMI has consistently highlighted the importance of national ownership by having Iraqis set their own agenda, visions and strategies. This approach is deeply rooted in CMI's perspectives on the essence and purpose of peacemaking.

The following points are some reflections on what has gone wrong in Iraq since 2003 and what the international community should learn from it.

First, no country(ies) should invade

another without the approval of the UN Security Council; any alleged **grounds for the use of military force** must be in line with the principles regulating the international system. The recent history of Iraq shows how quickly a state can descend into a brutal war, setting the country back decades and causing waves of countless refugees.

Second, a foreign-imposed regime change is doomed to fail and ushers domestic instability with a significant impact on the region. Any real change needs to come from within the country with the consensus of its citizens; only local ownership ensures sustainable results and long-term stability. Political dialogue, reform and consensus on the way forward are some of the best proven tools that contribute to creating the solid foundations of good governance. In Iraq, the externally imposed democratisation process lacked legitimacy due to the fact that state-building efforts were the outcome of an invasion and occupation rather than the result of a peace settlement.

Third, inclusive **political transitions** in post-war conflict settings are pivotal for a country's future. While cultural, historical, and ethnic specificities should be understood, the international community's support for democratic political transitions should avoid entrenching primary identities in politics and strive towards supporting the emergence of political institutions, as well as strengthening civic engagement across sectarian and/or ethnic lines.

The post-Saddam transition steered by US-lead forces witnessed the adoption of a set of measures that laid the foundation for a prolonged period of instability. For instance, the adoption of the de-Baathification law resulted in the dismantling of state institutions, including all law enforcement agencies, the army, security structures, and all ministries, led to a security vacuum, rampant corruption and fertile ground for illicit activities/groups –including terrorists such as ISIL.

The seeds of **sectarianism** were also sown in the post-Saddam phase. The Governing Council (GC) was created

by members of Saddam's former opposition (along with some independent individuals) instead of including representatives from a broader political, ethnic, and religious spectrum. For instance, the main parties represented in the GC were the ones of Shi'ites and Kurds, while the Islamic Party of the Sunni did not represent the entire Sunni community.

The composition of the new Iraqi government reflected a clear division of political blocks along ethnic and sectarian lines. This arrangement made Iraq vulnerable to **external influence**, thus leading to deepening political and social fractures within the country.

In October 2019, a wide-ranging anti-government protest took to the streets in Baghdad and quickly turned into the largest protest movement to challenge Iraq's post-2003 political order. These mass protests reflected a growing disillusionment with the highly sectarianised power-sharing political system. Grievances included unemployment, a lack of basic services, the absence of social justice, and corruption in political and economic institutions.

Notwithstanding the existing challenges, Iraq made remarkable progress since 2003. It has played a positive role in the region, hosting, inter alia, high-level meetings between Tehran and Riyadh. Despite a volatile security situation, most Iraqis feel much safer now than in the past.

Yet, to younger generations safety means much more than the absence of armed conflict. They dream of being able to live and work in their native country. Some of the political demands of youth organisations include the right to better opportunities, access to basic services, and, overall, better prospects.

Traditional political actors are often deaf to voices which advocate for change. As a result, the youth is drifting further away from a political system in which they do not recognise themselves. The disillusion of the youth is a disease common to many other countries. The cure is politics in its original definition: **inclusive dialogue**, exchange of ideas in a respectful manner, and active participation. This is the only way to build a stable and prosperous future, avoiding the resurfacing of latent tensions into perpetual and pervasive cycles of violence.

The tragic lessons which Iraq taught the international community are the following: the removal of a dictator is not sufficient to make a democracy; a new stable and safe political system can only be forged from within – by Iraqis for Iraqis.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Use of military force should be in line with the principles regulating the international system.
- Supporting the emergence of political institutions and strengthen civic engagement, while avoiding entrenching primary identities in politics is key in ensuring the legitimacy of governments.
- Promoting inclusive dialogue and active political participation is the only way forward to ensure stability and avoid the resurfacing of tensions and cycles of violence.