

Understanding Iraq's Persistent Domestic Instability: A Revisit to the 2003 Iraq War and the Effect of the US Foreign Policy

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Irak'taki Kalıcı İç İstikrarsızlığı Anlamak: ABD Dış Politikasının Etkisine ve 2003 Irak Savaşına Yeniden Bir Bakış

ÖZ

ABD'de gerçekleştirilen 9/11 terör saldırısının ardından karar alıcılar Bush Doktrini diye bilinen yeni bir doktrini uygulamaya koyarak uluslararası sistemde terörle bağlantısı olan veya teröristleri barındıran her hangi bir ülkeye karşı savaş açtıklarını ilan ettiler. Bu nedenle, Irak yeni doktrin ekseninde "hedef ülkelerden" birisi haline geldi. ABD ileri bir adım daha atarak, Irak halkını özgürleştirecekleri ve ülkeye demokrasi getirecekleri iddiasıyla 2003 yılında müttefikleriyle birlikte Irak'ı işgal etti. Saddam rejimi yıkılarak yerine yeni bir rejim getirildi. Saddam rejimi sonrasında ülkenin yeni yönetici elitleri büyük oranda Şiilerden seçilirken, Sünniler Irak'ın yeni politik sisteminin dışında kaldı. ABD'nin siyasi manevraları ülkede tansiyonu ve etnik-mezhep ayrılığını tetikledi. Açıkça ifade etmek gerekirse, 2003 Irak savaşı/işgalinin ardından Amerika'nın dış politika uygulamaları, yalnızca ülkenin belli başlı İslami mezhepleri (Sünniler ve Şiiler) arasındaki çatışmaları/bölünmeyi alevlendirmekle kalmadı, aynı zamanda ağırlıklı olarak Kürtler ve Araplar arasındaki "etnik yarığı" da genişletti. Alandaki bilimsel verilere dayanarak, araştırma temel olarak ABD öncülüğündeki 2003 askeri işgalin/İrak Savaşı'nın ve Irak'a yönelik politikasının Irak'ta süregelen iç istikrarsızlık üzerinde etkili olduğunu bilimsel kaynaklara dayanarak ortaya koymuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Irak, Etnik-Mezhep Ayrımı, 2003 ABD İşgali, Saddam Rejimi, Amerikan Dış Politikası.

Understanding Iraq's Persistent Domestic Instability: A Revisit to the 2003 Iraq War and the Effect of the US Foreign Policy

ABSTRACT

After the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in the heart of the United States (US), the US policymakers implemented a new doctrine known as the Bush Doctrine and declared war on any country in the international system which has a connection with terrorism or shelters the terrorists. In line with this, Iraq became one of "the target countries" on the axis of the new US doctrine. They took a further step and invaded Iraq with their allies in 2003 by claiming that they would liberate the Iraqi people from the authoritarian regime and bring democracy to Iraq. Toppling Saddam Hussein, the US implemented a new political regime in the country. In the post-Saddam regime, Iraq's new ruling elites were mainly chosen from the Shiites. On the other hand, the Sunnis stayed at the periphery of the emerging Iraqi political system. The US political manoeuvres triggered ethnic and sectarian (ethno-sectarian) segregation as well as a tense political environment in Iraq. To put it clearly, the practices of the US foreign policy in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq war/invasion not only inflamed the conflicts/divide between the major Islamic sects (the Sunni and the Shiite Muslims) but also widened "the ethnic rift", mainly between the Kurds and the Arabs in the country. The ethno-sectarian segregation among the Iraqi people highly affected the domestic political stability in the country. Depending on the scientific data in the field, this research has mainly revealed that the 2003 US-led military invasion/Iraq War and the US policy towards Iraq had an impact on the persistent domestic instability in Iraq.

Keywords: Iraq, Ethnic and Sectarian Segregation, the 2003 US-led invasion, the Saddam regime, the US Foreign Policy.

Introduction

This research aims to reveal the effect of the 2003 US-led military invasion of Iraq/the Iraq war and the US foreign policy toward Iraq on the persistent domestic instability. In 2003, with the coalition forces mainly backed by the UK, the US invaded Iraq by claiming that they would liberate the Iraqi people from the authoritarian regime of Saddam Hussein and bring democracy to Iraq. However, the US-led military invasion/Iraq war profoundly changed the balance of political power and the long-seated political system in Iraq.

Iraq's Shiites and Kurds supported the US and opened the door for US interference, whereas the Sunnis, mostly Sunni Arabs, in the country stood up to the US. In other words, the Iraqi people (either religious groups (Sunni and Shiite) or ethnic groups (Kurds and Arabs) reacted differently towards the US policy towards Iraq. Having entered Iraq, Americans eliminated the Saddam regime and brought new ruling elites to the political power in the country. Iraq's new ruling elites were mainly chosen from the Shiites although the Sunnis had been governing the country for many years. To clarify this, the Sunnis stayed on the periphery of Iraq's emerging political system launched by the US authority. Then, the practices of American foreign policy inflamed the ethnic and sectarian (ethno-sectarian) conflicts/divide in the region. The major Muslim sects-the Sunnis and the Shiites politically confronted each other. "The ethnic rift" mainly between the Kurds and the Arabs was widened, as well. Namely, the US-led invasion/Iraq war turned into one of the main sources of long-lasting ethno-sectarian segregation in the region, which caused the rivalry environment in Iraq's political life. More notably, the political ambitions of the ethnic and sectarian groups in the country turned into an endless and elusive struggle in the destabilized political environment created in the post-Iraq war. Also, a constant conflictual environment prevailed in the country.

In this research, by discussing the cause-effect relations of the facts and findings I will analyze the political issues and persistent domestic political instability in the post-Saddam regime (from the overthrow of Saddam regime via the US-led invasion in 2003 up to the present time). Thus, I have benefited from rich scientific literature/data based on academic journals, books and reports on Iraq. Also, the newspapers have contributed to the perspective of the research.

The research is divided into three parts. In the first part, it has been discussed the reason/s why the US took the decision to invade Iraq and/or how the US foreign policy was shaped by the war decision. Also, it shows the importance of democracy promotion/advocacy and doctrines in the US policy decision. The second part analyses the ethnic and sectarian composition during the Saddam regime to demonstrate the political environment in the post-Iraq war. In the third part, the effects of the US-led invasion/war on the political environment and ethnic and sectarian divide are examined. Particularly, it seeks to explain the respective roles of the US invasion and policy in shaping the domestic political structure in the post-Saddam regime. Then, the analysis/outputs of the given discussion were revealed in the conclusion.

1. US Political Stance and Allegations in the pre-Iraq War

The US experienced terrible terrorist attacks in 2001 with strong impacts on its foreign policy. In other words, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 caused some significant political changes and initiatives in the US (Lynch and Singh, 2008, p. 47). The US changed its foreign policy drastically and took some historic decisions, which means that it declared its war decision on any country in the system which has a connection with terrorism or harbours terrorists. The US leadership informed the other states about their decision stating that they would take all necessary measures against the regimes

developing Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) programs (Davies, 2008, p. 390). Also, President Bush announced that they would actively fight against the perceived threats in the following citation.

“We can’t defend America and our friends by hoping for the best. We cannot put our faith in the word of tyrants, who solemnly sign non-proliferation treaties, and then systemically break them. If we wait for threats to full materialize, we will have waited too long” (The White House, 2002).

His rhetoric portrayed that the US had changed its foreign policy as a hegemonic power and would take a further step to show determination. Also, these kinds of rhetoric indicate the emergence of a new US doctrine, which means that the “Bush doctrine” was launched as an American foreign policy and the US started to practice its new doctrine in international relations. Thus, the military invasion of Iraq/the Iraq War was one of the practices of the Bush doctrine.

President Bush believed that they had to protect the world and the next generations from the threats (Dunn, 2003, p. 295). From his viewpoint, it can be extracted that the American leaders consider themselves to be the guardians of the world. In line with these given perceptions, the Bush administration basically explained the aim of the military action as to end the proximate threat of Saddam Hussein’s stockpiles of WMD against the civilized world (Klare, 2006-2007, p. 31; Dunn, p. 294). Depending on it, they claimed that Saddam Hussein had weapons for mass destruction which would be a real threat to global security. However, it was clearly understood that Saddam’s regime did not have WMD contrary to what the US claimed. Additionally, in the UK an Inquiry Committee headed by Sir John Chilcot was instructed to find answers for the questions about the pre and post-2003 Iraq War. In 2016, they completed a report known as Chilcot’s Iraq Inquiry.¹ That’s why, they firstly and politically believed that they had to refrain from any attack on the other countries in the region or to a large extent, ensure global security. Secondly, the US authority sought to foster democracy in Iraq and its neighbouring countries (Klare, 2006-2007, p. 31). Additionally, the great tragedy of 9/11 created an opportunity/interference for the American leaders in the Muslim world on the liberal basis because they advocated democracy and pointed out that the regime of Saddam Hussein was not democratic. As a hegemonic state, the US took the responsibility to bring democracy to the Iraqi people by demolishing the Saddam government in Iraq. In fact, “democracy promotion” is not novel in the context of US security strategy. It plays an important role in US foreign policy and fosters their policy ambitions and interests abroad (Ratner, 2009, p. 391).

As mentioned earlier, the Bush administration advocated that they would bring democracy to Iraq by military action. However, the post-war political environment in the country posed that the US tried to legitimate their military action and specifically, the Iraqi occupation by exploiting the international concept of democracy. The US occupation and after was far from what they made a commitment to the country.² Within this scope, the US had “a double standard” in its foreign policy for a long time. Given this, it was claimed that the American policymakers oppose whatever does not promote their own economic and political interests, even if serious democratic and human rights are violated and the lives of innocent people are at stake (Kourvetaris, 1991, p. 68). Moving from this point of view, the US policy-makers primarily seek to protect American interests and lead their foreign policy in this way rather than the political structure/system (democratic or not) of the other countries in the system.

On the other hand, the US as a hegemonic power in the system also saw itself as the advocate of democracy and pretended to take responsibility to bring democracy to Iraq. The US leaders’ discourses following such a political concept and initiative convinced both the US public and its European allies to take military action to implement a democratic regime in Iraq and disarm Saddam Hussein against his proximate threat. In the European Union, the powerhouses divided in the decision-making process for the Iraq war. Germany and France strongly opposed the invasion of Iraq

¹ See in details, the Report of the Iraq Inquiry, 2016.

² To see the geopolitical and geoeconomical discussion on the Iraq war, Mercille, 2010, p. 327-337.

and war policies while the UK-led group, that prioritizes relations with the Atlantic Alliance among EU countries, maintained their pro-US stance.³

However, “democracy discourse and/or promotion” was used as a political tool for the US ruling elites to ease their security concerns and/or protect their interests. Additionally, through the concept/advocacy of democracy, they tried to find out a legitimate way to get into Iraq and take the control of it. Based on the abovementioned factors, the US-led allied forces initiated military action against the authoritarian regime of Saddam Hussein to change the regime, liberate the Iraqi people and, furthermore, bring political stability into the region. More notably, the ethno-sectarian groups in Iraq felt that the US military interference was a good opportunity for them to build a new political system and eliminate the authoritarian regime of Saddam Hussein. Hence, they tried to safeguard their political interests by exploiting the given foreign interference in their internal affairs.

2. The Ethnic and Sectarian Composition during the Saddam Hussein Era (1979-2003)

During the Saddam Hussein era, there existed a centralized political system under the Ba’ath leadership in Iraq, in which the secular Ba’ath Party had a privileged political position. Saddam Hussein consolidated his ruling/political power through this political system. Also, he deemed to strengthen his political authority with the Sunnis. Religion was a significant political force in the region (Nazir, 2006, p. 49-52). Therefore, he promoted and appointed Sunni Arabs as high-ranking officials as a way of controlling a possible rebellion within the Iraqi population (Damluji, 2010, p. 73). It was an attempt to secure his regime in the country. On the other hand, there was a conflict between Saddam's regime and the Shiites. Iranian and Iraqi Shiite leaders tried to lead their followers (the Shiite population) to take a position against Saddam’s regime while Saddam’s regime behaved against the Shiites cruelly and perceived them as “a potential enemy” to the regime (Polk, 2007, p. 134-135). Therefore, the Sunnis exploited the ruling power in Iraq during the Saddam Hussein era. To put it concretely, the majority of the politicians in Saddam’s regime were Arab Sunnis. More significantly, whether the political ruling elites were Sunnis or not, Iraq was ruled by and for Saddam’s family (Dodge, 2005, p. 32-33).

Saddam was ruling the country with the people whom “he trusted personally, privileging his kin, his clan and those who could be counted as ‘insiders’” (Tripp, 2007, p. 318). We can evaluate “insiders” as Saddam’s inner circle in politics. Saddam’s inner circle mostly came from distinct groups within the Sunni Arabs (Tripp, 2007, p. 318). Additionally, it was very important to be in Saddam’s inner circle to maintain interests. Iraqi resources were mostly used to bind individuals and sections of society on the basis of loyalty to Saddam Hussein and his ruling elites (Dodge, 2005, p. 33). The Sunni Arab elites backed up Saddam’s regime against the internal uprisings/conflicts of the Shiites and the Kurds (Hunt, 2005, p. 102). In this regard, Saddam Hussein’s support for the Sunnis and the Shiites’ weak position in politics and social life put a distance between the Sunnis and Shiites.

Table 1. Ethnic and Religious Groups in Iraq during and after the Saddam Regime

Ethnic groups	Arabs (75-80 %), Kurds (15-20%), Turkmens and others (5%) (*)
Religious groups	Muslims (95-98%): (Shiites: 64-69%), Sunnis: 29-34%), Christians (1%): (including Catholics, Orthodoxes, Protestants, Assyrian Church of the East), Others 1-4%. (**)

³ In the context of EU’s political approach, see: Bigaç, 2020.

Source: It was compiled from the World Factbook (2022), <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/iraq/>.

* Data on the ethnic composition of Iraq depends on the 1987 government estimate.

**Data on the religious composition depends on the 2015 estimate.

Iraqi society has religious and ethnic diversities with large separate groups, which reveals a different demographic structure and social diversities in the region. Although there are various ethnic groups, the Arabs are the first largest ethnic group in Iraq while the Kurds/Kurdish people are the second in the ethnic composition of the country (Table 1). However, there was tension between two large ethnic groups, Arabs and Kurds (Hunt, 2005, p. 102).

Iraq's Kurds, which are a dominant power in the north of Iraq have been willing to seize the political power in the country over the years. However, Saddam perceived the Kurds and Shiite Arabs as a threat to his regime's survival. Thus, he adopted "brutal policies" such as displacing Iraqi Kurds in the north of Iraq and Shiite Arabs in the south of Iraq to take control of the ethno-sectarian demographics in the country (Damluji, 2010, p. 73). In doing so, he pursued a strategy to maintain his absolute power throughout Iraq. However, this kind of politics, which focused on one man and his whims, could not be judged as democratic (Marr, 2012, p. 178). After the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Kurds became the most ardent supporters of the US military force in the region (Nazir, 2006, p. 52). They tried to help the American troops whenever they needed. In return, the US tried to strengthen them in the region.

Mona Damluji (2010, p. 73) claims that Saddam Hussein's political position towards the sectarian groups was never black and white, which means that he could use any instrument to convince the Iraqi people and get public support. Once he promoted an Islamic image to get public support in the 1991 Gulf war over Kuwait. Also, he built new mosques and established a theological university called Saddam University where only Sunni Islam was taught (Nazir, 2006, p. 52). More notably, he backed the Sunnis through his political view by disregarding the Shiite majority of the population (Table 1). In return for Saddam's political preference, the Shiites became ardent opponents of the political system as they couldn't gain sufficient power in the political system during the Saddam Hussein era. Based on them, Saddam Hussein's policy, which split up ethnic and sectarian groups by granting privileges to group/s over the others in order to secure his ruling power caused the Iraqi people to determine different attitudes towards the political system and the regime in the country.

3. The Political Environment in the post-Iraq War

The US-led allied forces invaded Iraq with their military muscle in 2003. Since the Sunnis (Sunni Arabs) had the dominant political power in Iraq, they tried to strengthen the public resistance against the US invasion. Thus, the initial demonstration against the invasion started in the regions of the Sunni Arabs (Polk, 2007, p. 196), which meant that they were supporters of the status quo in the country. In other words, the Sunni Arabs stood up as "the main pillar of the resistance" (Moaddel, Tessler and Inglehart, 2008-09, p. 624). The Americans clearly understood that the Kurds and the Shiite Arabs, which were overwhelmed by the Ba'ath regime (Köse, 2015, p. 56), were against the former regime (Saddam's regime) and the Sunni Arabs were equated with the Ba'ath loyalists (Damluji, 2010, p. 73).

By overthrowing Saddam's regime, the Sunni Arabs lost their long-termed political position in the country. Instead, Iraq's Shiites strengthened their political power in the country with the support of the US leadership. By doing this, the US attempted to reduce the Iranian influence on the Shiites and launch an alternative power against Iran. Thus, they backed a sectarian policy and the Sunni-Shiite divide to balance Iran and Iranian threats in the region. Simply put, they used the Shiites as a barrier to the spread of Iranian regional influence and taking control of the country. Also, they supported them in the new regime, whereas they let the Sunnis stay at the periphery of the political power in the post-Saddam period (ABD'nin Çekilmesinin Ardından, ORSAM, 2011, p. 28-31).

In the context of the US policy towards the ethnic groups in Iraq, the US leadership gave support to the Kurds in northern Iraq. They desired to rebuild the country by exploiting the ethnic elements and identities such as Iraq's Kurds. In return, the Kurds supported the US military and political initiatives in the country, which means that it was a mutual interest for both sides. More importantly, the Iraqi Kurds caught a very historic opportunity in the aftermath of the US-led invasion (ORSAM, 2011, p. 31). They found a political position in the new political system implemented by the US. In this respect, both the US leaders and the inner ethno-sectarian dynamics wanted to preserve their own interests during and after the invasion/war. On the other hand, the Turkmens were politically pressed among the stronger political power centres in the country. They couldn't find a better political position in the political system during and after the Saddam era (Kerkuklu, 2007; Kayılı, 2005).

When the US succeeded in invading Iraq, it initially changed the political leaders. It eliminated the Ba'ath regime of Saddam Hussein and initially established the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) under L. Paul Bremer's administration. The CPA got political power in Iraq. It was a new and alien authority in the country. In the early days, the CPA's activities were very important because it tried to establish a political structure in the country, that consolidated the strength of the sectarian parties, primarily relying on Shiites' loyalties, in the following governments (Damluji, 2010, 72-73). The sects tried to strengthen their positions in the emerging political system in Iraq. In line with this, Shiite leaders participated in the political system with a privileged position (Nazir, 2006, p. 55). Moreover, they ardently desired to control the political power in the country.

The Americans were going to build a new political system in Iraq. The US claimed to free the Iraqi people and bring democracy to those people before the Iraq war and attempted to build a new political system in Iraq, accordingly. They promoted an election and a constitution respectively in 2005. The proposed constitution was approved by the Iraqi people in a referendum in the same year. During the adoption of the constitution, sectarian and ethnic tensions highly increased (Nazir, 2006, p. 57). The US leadership backed Shiite political parties which seized the ruling power with majority control of the Iraqi parliament in the 2005 election (Damluji, 2010, p. 74). Major Sunni groups in Iraq boycotted the election (Dodge, 2005, p. 28). The CPA opened the door for Shi'a politicians and refrained Sunni leaders from forming the new Iraqi government and endowed sectarian identities with critical political significance. The election brought a new political system to Iraq and the Sunnis could not take a good position in the new political system. In other words, the Sunnis had no future in the new political system launched by the US. In this context, The CPA's de-Ba'athification program caused the marginalization of the Sunnis (Taras, 2006, p. 46). The Sunnis displayed stronger attitudes against the presence of the US-led coalition forces. However, they couldn't manage to end the US dominance and inducement in the political and social life in the post-Iraq war because they became weaker with the US policy towards the ethnic and sectarian groups (Visser, 2007-08, p. 88).

The US did not occupy unchallenging status in Iraq because it had a very important rival: Iran. Iranian leadership responded to the novel political system in Iraq constructively and diplomatically by sending an Iranian delegation to Baghdad and recognizing the ruling authority in the country. With these diplomatic attempts, they managed to make great deals with the new Iraqi rulers on the basis of financial support, energy, security, and trade (Nasr, 2006, p. 60). From this perspective, Iran benefited from the US-led invasion more than the US itself. Additionally, the Iraqis turned their faces to Iran as it had a great influence on the country. "Shiite identity" helped the Iranian leaders to make an impact on the new political system in Iraq. More notably, the Iranian influence was teasing the US Administration because they believed that Iran was causing and supporting unrest in Iraq (Fürting, 2007, p. 635).

Nuri el-Maliki, who had close relations with the Iranian regime, formed a government. The Maliki government couldn't ease the insurgency in the country although he tried to balance the US administration and the Iraqi people. Also, the sectarian division increased in the country. The Sunni clerics wanted the people to stand against the foreign forces and warned against the sectarian division in Iraq. Moreover, they tried to preserve the Islamic identity of the nation (Fürting, 2007, p. 630-632).

The local rebels and foreign Arab militants deemed to establish an Islamic state based on their view of such a political system and force US troops to withdraw from Iraq (Nazir, 2006, p. 60). These militants were ready to fight against the US and its allied forces. They sought to implement their ideas and deport the US troops. On the other hand, the US ruling elites insisted on eliminating the obstacles on their way. They sent more troops to Iraq to bring stability to Baghdad and other provinces. Additionally, local Shiite actors like Ayatollah Sistani played an important role in the implementation of US policy such as launching an election in the post-Saddam regime until the anti-Americanism increased in the country (Sluglett, 2008, p. 604).

In 2006, the militants demolished the golden dome of the sacred Shiite shrine in Samarra, which triggered violence and demonstrations in the county. Shiites attacked the Sunni mosques and Sunnis and caused human casualties (Howard, 2006). From this standpoint, American interference created troubles in the country by increasing segregation and violence throughout the country.

Especially in Baghdad, there was unrest because of the new sectarian division and its effects on the residents. To put it concretely, in the sectarian war in Baghdad, many people were killed or displaced. More significantly, the social and sectarian demographic structure in the city changed drastically because of the internal displacement (Marr, 2012, p. 258). The displacement of Sunnis and Shiites posed a consequence of intentional policies of the armed militias, as well (Ferris, 2013). In the context of displacement and sectarian divide, many people had to move to other places in order to live peacefully. Nearly 1 in 25 Iraqis was displaced from their homes during and after the 2003 US invasion, which means the US invasion displaced nearly over one million Iraqi people inside and forced nearly 900 thousand to be refugee abroad. Additionally, nearly 9.2 million Iraqi people were internally displaced or refugees up to 2020 (Iraqi Refugees and Cost of War, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2022). People came to that point: Any Iraqi had to move to a house where the majority of his/her sect lived rather than in mixed communities (Damluji, 2010, p. 79).

The US was stuck due to the increasing domestic instability in Iraq. More notably, it lost a great amount of money and its prestige in the international arena. Also, it lost a great number of American soldiers (much more Iraqi people were killed.) Furthermore, it had no credibility in bringing democracy to Iraq or being a liberator. At last, President Barack Obama decided to withdraw US troops from Iraq in 2011 with the calculation of the cost of the war including financial losses and war casualties. The cost of war was heavy (O'Hanlon and Livingston, 2011). However, he claimed that they left a stable country behind despite a great number of dead and wounded people, ethno-sectarian divide in the society, displaced people and political turmoil in the country. Contrary to his discourse, the Obama administration was criticized by US politicians for leaving Iraq unstable (ABD Bağdat'taki Bayrağını, BBC News, 2011).

With the withdrawal of the US troops from the Iraqi soils in 2011, a power vacuum occurred in the region. Then, the popular protests called the Arab Spring emerged in Tunisia and expanded to almost all of the countries in the in the region by forcing the long-standing regimes to change and/or make political reforms. In Iraq, people rushed into the streets to stand against the political corruption, social and political-based issues, economy and health, much of which were caused by the US invasion in 2003. The anti-government protests were in effect almost everywhere in the country from 2011 to 2014.⁴

When the Maliki government failed to launch the promised reforms, public protests increased in the country. The Sunni leaders such as Muqtada al-Sadr backed the Maliki government against the nationwide protests. Yet, the attacks of Maliki forces on Sunni camps in Haviye caused casualties and his sectarian political approach escalated the tension much more in the country (Alaca, 2021). Also, exploiting the power vacuum in the region and the grievances of the 2013 protests, the Daesh/ISIS terrorist group emerged in the region. They consolidated their strength in the Iraqi territories by taking the control of Mosul and Kirkuk, which had rich-oil reserves. They stayed on Iraq's soil until

⁴ Also, see the role of the social media during the Iraqi protest in Rawi, 2014, p. 916-942.

the Iraqi forces expelled them from the country in 2017. From this standpoint, we can analyze that the weakness and ethno-sectarian division of Iraq's political structure and Iraqi forces in the post-Saddam regime led to Daesh's long-standing stay and power consolidation in the country.

However, ethnic and sectarian division, instability and power void led to political unrest and nationwide protests in the country. In 2017, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) demanded a referendum for autonomy in the country, which created tension between Baghdad and Erbil. After the referendum, the central government interfered with its military force and KRG stepped back, accordingly (Aygün, 2018). Moreover, despite a series of ethno-sectarian protests and/or civil unrest since the US invasion of Iraq/Iraq war, the October 2019 protest had a greater impact on Iraq's political life. A lot of people protested against the existing government primarily for political corruption, high unemployment and lack of public services. The security forces ended the mentioned protest by causing many casualties and anger in society (AlJazeera, 2019). However, it put pressure on Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi to resign from the ruling power. Instead, Mustafa al-Kadhimi came to power in the interim government.

The country went to the election in October 2021 but the election results caused deadly clashes in Baghdad. The ethno-sectarian-backed parties protested the election although it was credible (Freedom House, 2022). Iran-backed militias attacked the government building (the Green Zone) in Baghdad and wanted to recount the votes of the election. Later, Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi was attacked via an armed drone strike. In line with this, the ethno-sectarian divide in the country negatively affected the political order of the country. Additionally, the ethnic and sectarian parties tried to seize political power for their interests and advantages in the country. More significantly, the political system mainly designed by the US in the post-Saddam era affected the consequences of the elections and the attitudes of the political parties.

Despite some recent changes in the electoral system, it required improvements to form a more representative government and meet the public requirements (Stewart-Jolley, 2021, p. 25). Also, the political parties which rallied in the election disregarded the democratic rights and political stability of the country to foster their political weight. Moving from here, the US invasion/Iraq war prompted domestic political instability by causing an ethno-sectarian divide in the country and failing a balanced political system.

Conclusion

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the US ruling elites took a drastic decision to occupy Iraqi soil by claiming that they wanted to free the Iraqi people and bring democracy to Iraq. In other words, they would establish a democratic and free country after eliminating the regime of Saddam Hussein. However, it can be concluded that the US leadership used the promotion/advocacy of democracy as a political tool to ensure their interests and security. Moreover, the military action of the US-led allied forces/coalition forces didn't manage to bring democracy to Iraq and build a stable political structure in the country, which could be seen with a low score and status (29/100, Not Free) in the rating/evaluation report of the Freedom House (Freedom House, 2022). Even, the invasion fed a new and even more divisive sectarian politics under the false banner of democracy. To put it clearly, American foreign policy during and after the invasion/Iraq War mostly generated both ethnic and sectarian (ethno-sectarian) divisions in Iraq.

The major sects in Iraq tried to exploit the invasion. In this sense, the Shiites desired to increase their political weight in the emerging political system that the US launched in the post-Saddam era. Therefore, they challenged to dominate the political system. On the other hand, the Sunnis did not seek to lose power and maintained "the status quo" in the country. They resisted American forces (Hunt, 2005, p. 107). From this perspective, the US-led invasion led to major changes in the balance of power in domestic politics: a rapid decline of Sunni power, a rise of Shiite power, and the KRG's challenge for autonomy/independence.

The Bush administration initially appointed a new ruling authority, the CPA and in 2005, the CPA endeavoured to organize an election and launch a constitution in the country, which encouraged the Shiite majority to come to power and strengthen their position in the emerging political system. While they got the greater ruling power, the Sunnis lost their prominent power. The CPA removed Sunni elites from the higher positions and limited their benefits in the new Iraqi political system. Additionally, the US-led military operation and political decisions fueled the ethno-sectarian violence and internal displacement in Iraq. The people had to move to the places where the majority of their sects lived. Shiites settled in the south, Sunnis in the west, and Kurds in the north.

As mentioned above, the Bush administration considered itself at war against terrorism and advocates of democracy. Depending on this legitimacy, they felt that they had the right to occupy the territories in the far distance. The US' challenge in 2003 led to instability, insecurity, anarchy, chaos, terrorism, the aggression of the warlords, humanitarian problems, and anti-democratic practices in Iraq. After the invasion, Iraq didn't become more democratic, but more Shiite as cited in the following. "By liberating and empowering Iraq's Shiite majority, the Bush administration helped a broad Shiite revival launch, which will upset the sectarian balance in Iraq and the Middle East for years to come" (Nasr, 2006, p. 58).

The current political turmoil/instability in the country mostly originated from the 2003 US-led invasion and political changes in Iraq afterwards. Furthermore, it is predictable that the changeover from the existing one to liberal democracy, which substantially advocates providing human rights, freedom of press, universal suffrage, property rights, political freedom, separation of powers in government and social contracts, will take a longer time in the country.

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