# Iraq–U.S. War

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# Iraq–U.S. War

Years of tension between the United States and Iraq led in March 2003 to a direct invasion of Iraq by an American-led coalition. Iraq's Ba'th Party government, headed by Saddam Hussein (1937–2006), was quickly overthrown, but years of instability followed as a variety of Iraqi groups, and some foreigners, fought against the American occupying forces and against the new Iraqi government the United States sponsored.

## TENSION: 1991–2001

In the first Gulf War, in 1991, a coalition led by the United States drove Iraqi forces out of Kuwait and destroyed much of the Iraqi military, but major coalition ground units went only a modest distance into southern Iraq; they did not attempt to enter any city.

Hussein, and most key leaders of his government and of the Ba'th Party, were Arabs belonging to the Sunni branch of Islam. Sunni Arabs made up about one-fifth of Iraq's population; they lived mostly in central and western Iraq. Another fifth were Kurds, who lived overwhelmingly in the north. Arabs belonging to the Shiite branch of Islam made up a majority of the population; they were especially strong in the south. Most of the Kurds were Sunni, but when people spoke of "the Sunnis" in Iraq, they almost always meant just the Sunni Arabs, not the Kurds.

Immediately after the 1991 war, there were revolts by both Shiite Arabs in the south and Kurds in the north. The government put down the Shiite rebellion with great brutality, but international intervention helped the Kurds

achieve de facto autonomy in a large region of northern Iraq, called Kurdistan.

Iraq grudgingly accepted United Nations Security Council resolutions under which it was to eliminate, under international supervision, all nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons ("weapons of mass destruction" or WMDs). Hussein believed at first that he could conceal Iraq's extensive WMD programs and stockpiles from UN inspectors, but the inspectors proved more effective than he had expected. He then disposed of most of his prohibited weapons and programs, keeping no more than he could reasonably hope to conceal from the inspectors. Years of cat-and-mouse games followed. Late in 1998 the United States and Britain launched strikes using aircraft and cruise missiles to punish Hussein for his refusal to cooperate with the inspection process. The inspectors withdrew from Iraq before these strikes, and did not return afterward.

Iraq remained under severe economic sanctions, originally imposed late in 1990 after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. The effect of these was moderated only somewhat by the "oil-for-food" program after 1996. The Iraqi economy



remained crippled, and the Iraqi armed forces remained far below their 1990 strength for lack of funding. U.S. aircraft patrolled large "no-fly zones" where the Iraqis were forbidden to operate military aircraft. The patrol aircraft frequently bombed antiaircraft guns, surface-to-air missiles, and radars when the Iraqis fired on aircraft or seemed about to do so.

## TOWARD A SECOND WAR: 2001–2003

After the Afghanistan-based terrorist organization Al-Qaeda attacked the United States on September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush quickly began thinking of invading Iraq. Senior administration officials believed that significant links existed between the Iraqi government and Al-Qaeda. In June 2002 they increased the frequency of U.S. air strikes in southern Iraq. These continued to be officially explained as responses to attacks and threats against aircraft patrolling the no-fly zones. But, in fact, the United States was systematically destroying Iraqi air-defense systems.

The U.S. Congress authorized the use of force against Iraq on October 10, 2002, but the UN Security Council was reluctant to go so far. Security Council

Resolution 1441, passed on November 8, offered Iraq “a final opportunity to comply with its disarmament obligations,” with a reminder that the Security Council “has repeatedly warned Iraq that it will face serious consequences as a result of its continued violations of its obligations.” The United States expected, after a short interval, to obtain a second resolution stating that Iraq had missed its final opportunity, and authorizing force. But Iraq allowed the UN weapons inspectors to return before the end of 2002, and gave them cooperation that was, while not perfect, far better than at any time in the 1990s. In early 2003 the United States was arguing, with evidence that later turned out to have been mostly inaccurate, that Iraq’s WMD programs and stockpiles were so large and diversified as to constitute a major threat, justifying military action. But it was difficult to reconcile these American claims with the failure of UN inspectors to find any WMDs, despite searching in the places where American officials told them to search.

The U.S. government responded by attacking the credibility of the inspectors. But French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin and his allies, who argued that there was no immediate need for war, drew increasing support from the members of the Security Council. President Bush decided to go to war without UN authorization, as head of a “coalition of the willing.”

## THE INVASION OF IRAQ: MARCH–APRIL 2003

Early on March 20, 2003, the United States tried to kill Saddam Hussein and his two sons using aircraft and Tomahawk cruise missiles. The ground invasion of Iraq, coming from Kuwait, began a few hours later. The number of troops involved was surprisingly small. American leaders were so confident of Iraq’s weakness that, for an invasion aimed at taking the whole country, they used a force far smaller than the one they had sent in 1991 to accomplish much more limited goals.

A primarily British force occupied the extreme southeast, around the city of Basra. American troops took the main body of Iraq. Marine units, on the right wing, crossed the Euphrates River at Nasiriyah; the heaviest American losses of the campaign were in that city. Most of the Marines proceeded north, crossed the Tigris River, and then turned west toward the capital, Baghdad. Army units, on the left wing, went west across the deserts south of the Euphrates until they were south or even a little southwest of Baghdad, then turned north and finally came at Baghdad from the southwest.

Iraqi air defenses had been so weakened by months of American air strikes that U.S. helicopter gunships and fixed-wing aircraft were able to operate in comparative safety in large areas of Iraq. They devastated Iraqi military units in the path of the American ground forces, especially the larger units with heavier weapons. What remained of the Iraqi forces were no match for American ground forces. And the Americans moved so fast that the Iraqis had little opportunity to draw lessons from the defeat of one unit that could enable another to do better.

The speed with which the Americans advanced would have made them vulnerable to ambushes, and attacks on their supply lines, by competent and innovative enemy forces. They encountered few such forces. The Iraqi units that were willing to fight—that did not just fade away—mostly placed themselves unimaginatively in the path of the American juggernaut, and were crushed by it. The first unpleasant surprise for the Americans was a paramilitary organization, the Fedayeen Saddam. But the surprise was that the Fedayeen Saddam fought at all. They did not fight with great skill, they did not have heavy weapons, and they did not inflict heavy casualties on the Americans. Another surprise was more ominous. On March 29 a suicide bomber driving a taxi killed four U.S. troops at a checkpoint. Another suicide bomber killed three Americans on April 3.

Small groups of American forces went into northern Iraq by air, seizing some positions themselves and helping Kurdish forces, the *peshmerga*, to seize others. The United States had hoped to send in a much larger force through Turkey, but the Turks had refused permission.

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American bombing of the Iraqi air-defense system before the nominal opening of the war had been effective, and the tactical air strikes that supported the ground invasion were very successful. American strategic bombing during the war was less so. The “shock and awe” bombing of conspicuous government buildings and palaces in central Baghdad, on March 21, did not have the hoped-for psychological effect.

The American forces went more than half the distance from Kuwait to Baghdad in a week, paused for a few days to allow supplies to catch up with

the front of the advance and to clear Iraqi forces away from their supply lines, and then resumed their advance. U.S. Army troops had full control of Baghdad's main airport, west of the city, by April 5. On that day, a task force of tanks and other tracked vehicles made an armed reconnaissance patrol, a "thunder run," going deep into Baghdad from the south and then departing to the west. One American was killed, but American forces killed an estimated eight hundred to one thousand Iraqi soldiers. Two days later the same task force and two others made a second thunder run. This time they went to the heart of the city, occupying, among other sites, two of Hussein's palaces beside the Tigris, and remained there. The Iraqis were unable to dislodge them on April 7 and 8, and meanwhile other Army units were entering the city from the northwest. U.S. Marines were coming from the southeast. During the night of April 8 to 9, Iraqi leaders, recognizing that they had lost the struggle for Baghdad, went into hiding. Their government ceased to function as a government, though some of their soldiers continued to resist the Americans.

Looting began in parts of Baghdad on April 7. It reached disastrous levels on April 9. There were not nearly enough American troops to restore order, and they did not at first even make much of an attempt; few thought of the maintenance of order as their responsibility.

## RECONSTRUCTION AND RESISTANCE

The United States had done little to prepare for the occupation of Iraq. Apparently it was believed that once Saddam Hussein was gone, a new government, with exiled leaders such as the secular Shiite Ahmad Chalabi playing key roles, could be created with little further American effort. When this did not happen, Paul Bremer was sent in May 2003 to head a new body, the Coalition Provisional Authority, which ruled Iraq until mid-2004. An "Iraqi Governing Council" was established in July 2003 but was not given much authority.

An insurgency made up primarily of Sunni Arabs emerged gradually out of the background of general lawlessness that followed the war. Its diverse elements often cooperated, but had no overall command. First, there were the surviving elements of the Ba'th Party. When the government collapsed in April 2003, leaders and officers going into hiding took with them considerable funds, some of which they used to finance the insurgency. The Americans at first overestimated the importance of the Ba'th leaders, and

hoped that the capture of Hussein in December 2003 would seriously weaken the insurgency, but there was not much effect. (Hussein's execution in December 2006 seemed, if anything, to inflame the insurgency further.)

Groups rooted in local communities and tribes formed the great mass of the insurgency. Many felt a nationalist hostility toward foreign occupiers. Many resented the way the Americans had reduced the power of the Sunni Arabs, traditionally the dominant force in Iraq, by empowering the Shiite majority and the Kurds. Many were angry with the number of Iraqis the Americans had killed, about the way troops searched Iraqi homes at night, looking for weapons and hauling off suspects in handcuffs and hoods, and so forth.

Finally, there were foreign fighters from many countries. The most important of these were very similar to Al-Qaeda and eventually began calling themselves "Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia." They were led by a Jordanian, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, until his death in June 2006. They thought of Iraq as one front in a broader struggle directed both against the United States and against corrupt secular governments in the Muslim world. They are believed to have been responsible for most of the spectacular suicide bombings in Iraq, killing large numbers of people, including many Shiite civilians, and trying to trigger a civil war of Sunnis against Shiites.

The coalition headed by the United States had a substantial number of British troops and smaller numbers of troops from other nations, but these were overwhelmingly in areas of southern Iraq that were predominantly Shiite. It was the Americans who faced the Sunni Arab insurgency.

The violence had become a major problem by August 2003, and it grew thereafter. By early 2004 numerous towns were under insurgent control. In April, when the United States assaulted Fallujah, west of Baghdad, it became apparent that taking Fallujah would require so much firepower as to destroy much of the city. The Americans backed off, and Fallujah remained under insurgent control until it was finally taken in a bloody battle that indeed destroyed much of the city in November 2004.

At times, the coalition faced a dangerous widening of the insurgency into the Shiite community. A radical young Shiite cleric, Moqtada al-Sadr, wanted Iraq to have a religiously based government similar to that of Iran. His militia, the Mahdi (Mehdi) Army, clashed with American forces on a serious scale in April 2004, and again in August.

On June 28, 2004, the United States officially granted sovereignty to an Iraqi government headed by Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, a secular Shiite. In January 2005 elections were held for a national assembly. An alliance of religiously oriented Shiites, presided over but not openly led by Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the most respected religious leader in Iraq, won a majority of the seats. A constitution was then written, and an election under the new constitution was held in December 2005. Many more Sunni Arabs voted in this election than had voted in January. It was hoped that this development would lead many of those who had supported the insurgency to shift their efforts toward participation in peaceful political processes. But this did not quickly occur.

In the second half of 2004, the United States significantly expanded its efforts to train Iraqi military and security forces. By the second half of 2005, Iraqi forces were having a clear and substantial impact, establishing, for example, a reasonable level of security on the notorious highway linking the city of Baghdad with its airport. But there was increasing concern about the extent to which some elements of the security forces, especially the police, were being infiltrated by and becoming tools of the militias of Sadr and other religiously oriented Shiite leaders.

For a long time, the Shiites showed remarkable restraint, not retaliating indiscriminately for Sunni insurgents' murders of Shiite civilians. But in February 2006 insurgents blew up the Golden Mosque in Samarra, one of the holiest Shiite shrines in Iraq, and the Shiites exploded in rage. Soon Shiite "death squads" were abducting, torturing, and murdering Sunnis by the thousands, and Sunnis were doing the same to Shiites in a cycle of revenge killings, mainly in Baghdad and nearby cities, that produced higher death tolls than the ongoing struggle pitting the insurgency against coalition and government forces. Militants on each side carried out ethnic cleansing, driving members of the other group out of mixed neighborhoods. The United States blamed Shiite militias, especially the Mahdi Army, for the worst of the violence. But Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki was politically allied with Moqtada al-Sadr and other militia leaders; he often resisted American efforts to crack down on the militias.

U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was determined to use as few American military personnel as possible in the occupation of Iraq, and he long downplayed the magnitude of the problems there. Critics argued that the American force in Iraq was too small to accomplish its mission. But as the violence escalated, political support for the war effort declined in the United States. Critics of government policy increasingly spoke of setting a timetable for withdrawal of the forces the United States already had in Iraq, rather than sending more.

Rumsfeld resigned at the end of 2006, and top American officials spoke more openly than ever before about the need for a change of policy. In January 2007 President Bush announced that Prime Minister al-Maliki had committed himself to a real crackdown on violent militias, regardless of sect. Bush also announced that he was sending more than 21,000 additional American troops to Iraq, most of them to Baghdad, to support Iraqi government efforts to restore order. Few in the American public or the Congress had much faith that this new effort would succeed, though as of spring 2007 violence in and around Baghdad decreased significantly.

**SEE ALSO** *Al-Qaeda ; Arabs ; Bush, George W. ; Counterterrorism ; Gulf War of 1991 ; Hussein, Saddam ; Islam, Shia and Sunni ; Petroleum Industry ; September 11, 2001 ; Terrorism ; War ; Weapons of Mass Destruction*

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