

The U.S.-Iraq War's Legacy in Global Terrorism and the Taliban's Return to Power

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Abstract

The 2003 U.S.-Iraq War, initiated with claims of eliminating weapons of mass destruction and removing Saddam Hussein, has had lasting effects that influence global security today. Although the main military objectives were quickly met, the war's long-term consequences extended well beyond Iraq itself. This article explores how the invasion and occupation unintentionally fostered an environment conducive to terrorism - not just in Iraq but throughout the region and worldwide. Actions like disbanding Iraq's military, alienating Sunni communities, and increasing sectarian violence fueled the rise of radical groups such as ISIS, which exploited instability and grievances to consolidate power. Meanwhile, the extended U.S. military involvement in the Middle East drew focus and resources away from Afghanistan, hampering efforts to establish lasting governance and security. This diversion enabled the Taliban to reorganize, strengthen, and eventually retake power in 2021 after U.S. forces withdrew. The analysis highlights how these two major conflicts are linked, showing that policy choices from the early 2000s unintentionally strengthened the very extremist groups they sought to oppose. By examining the unintended effects of the Iraq War and its connection to the Taliban's resurgence, this paper highlights the broader impacts of military intervention, the intricacies of state-building in conflict zones, and the long-term obstacles in the global fight against terrorism. Grasping these links is essential for developing more effective and responsible foreign policy in the future.

Keywords: U.S.-Iraq War, Global Terrorism, Taliban, Post-9/11 Conflicts, Security Studies, Counterterrorism, Foreign Intervention, Political Instability, Middle Eastern Politics, Regime Change, Insurgency, Terrorist Networks, Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda, ISIS, State Fragility, International Relations, Asymmetric Warfare, Geopolitical Consequences, War on Terror

Introduction

The ripple effects of the U.S.-led intervention in Iraq have profoundly influenced the early 21st century. Originally presented as a pre-emptive strike to eliminate weapons of mass destruction and disrupt terrorist networks, the 2003 U.S.-Iraq War quickly turned into a long-lasting conflict with wide-reaching effects. While the main goal - to remove Saddam Hussein - was achieved quickly, the aftermath threw Iraq into chaos, tearing apart its fragile social fabric and fueling a cycle of sectarian violence. The dismantling of the Ba'athist regime, the disbandment of the Iraqi military, and the installation of a U.S.-backed transitional government created a power vacuum that extremist groups exploited rapidly. Instead of reducing terrorism, the invasion unintentionally increased it, leading to the rise of insurgent networks and eventually, the Islamic State. (ISIS) (A, 2016).

The Iraq War's strategic errors had effects that extended well beyond Iraq's borders. As the U.S. military's focus shifted to Iraq, Afghanistan - the original front of the "War on Terror" - began to receive less attention. Early successes against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda after 2001 faded without ongoing international support and comprehensive state-building efforts (Byman, 2015). Over the following twenty years, Afghanistan faced continued political turmoil, corruption, and insurgent resurgence. In 2021, the Taliban took advantage of reduced U.S. presence and widespread disillusionment among Afghans, retaking control in a dramatic reversal of two decades of intervention. (Cockburn, 2015).

This paper examines the long-term effects of the U.S.-Iraq War on global terrorism and how it indirectly led to the Taliban's resurgence. It contends that the war not only destabilized the Middle East but also fostered conditions that encouraged radicalization throughout the region. The dissemination of jihadist ideologies, supported by online networks and driven by anti-Western sentiment, thrived amidst the chaos left behind. The analysis explores how flawed foreign policies, short-term military goals, and a lack of cultural insight influenced the rise of modern extremist movements.

Additionally, the research places the Taliban's resurgence in the context of broader failed interventions. It examines how U.S. involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan is interconnected, highlighting the impact of fragmented counterterrorism efforts and inconsistent diplomacy (Khalilzad, 2016). The study provides insight into how the legacy of the Iraq War still

affects the Middle East, South Asia, and the global arena - altering security dynamics, shaping international relations, and questioning the effectiveness of Western military interventions. (Ricks, 2007).

By examining these developments holistically, this paper aims to contribute to a nuanced Understanding of how the U.S.-Iraq War influenced the development of global terrorism and indirectly enabled the Taliban's return, raising important questions about the future of international conflict management, counterinsurgency, and foreign policy.

Methods

This study uses a qualitative, interpretive approach to examine the complex legacy of the U.S.-Iraq War, particularly its impact on global terrorism and the Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan. Given the focus on cause-and-effect, historical progress, and ideological changes, a qualitative method allows the researcher to delve into the deeper mechanisms, patterns, and geopolitical factors that cannot be fully understood through quantitative data alone.

1. Historical-Political Analysis

A significant part of the research focuses on historical-political analysis to trace the timeline of events from the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq to the Taliban's return to power in 2021. This includes examining:

- The reasons behind the U.S. invasion of Iraq.
- The collapse of Iraqi state institutions after the invasion.
- The development of insurgent and terrorist groups, especially Al-Qaeda in Iraq and ISIS.
- The course of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan and the shift away from it during the Iraq campaign.

This analysis uses historical documents, declassified government records (when available), official reports, and secondary sources to understand key policy decisions and their impacts.

2. Comparative Case Study Method

To find similarities and differences, the study uses a comparative case study approach focusing on two key cases:

- Iraq (2003–2017): The destabilization after Saddam Hussein's removal, the rise of insurgency, and the formation of ISIS.
- Afghanistan (2001–2021): The initial defeat of the Taliban, twenty years of U.S. nation-building efforts, and the group's eventual return to power.

Each case is examined separately and then compared to identify connections between U.S. military strategies, the failure of

counterinsurgency efforts, and the long-term sociopolitical void that allowed terrorist groups to flourish.

3. *Thematic Content Analysis*

To find common themes, motives, and policy outcomes, a thematic content analysis was performed on a wide range of documents, including:

- Academic journal articles.
- Think tank publications (e.g., RAND Corporation, Brookings Institution, Carnegie Endowment).
- Speeches by U.S. political and military leaders.
- News reports and timelines from credible outlets (BBC, Al Jazeera, The Guardian).
- U.N. and NGO reports on conflict, terrorism, and humanitarian issues.

The material was examined for common themes, including:

- Strategic failures of U.S. intervention
- Rise of radical ideology in post-conflict areas
- Weaknesses in post-war governance institutions
- International views on U.S. military policy

Data coding was performed manually, involving cross-referencing multiple sources to ensure accuracy and consistency.

4. *Source Selection and Reliability*

The study focused on peer-reviewed sources, government documents, and firsthand eyewitness reports to ensure academic rigor and accuracy. Sources were chosen based on their relevance, credibility, and recent publication date (2001–2024). Care was taken to include diverse perspectives, including Western, Middle Eastern, and international viewpoints, to minimize bias.

5. *Analytical Framework*

The research draws on critical international relations theory and conflict studies, particularly examining:

- The unintended consequences of foreign intervention.
- Power vacuums in failing states.
- Radicalization as a reaction to military occupation and foreign-imposed governance.

These frameworks provided a theoretical perspective to interpret empirical data and link related geopolitical events.

6. *Limitations*

- Several limitations are acknowledged:
- Much military data remains classified or partly redacted.
- Determining causality in complex geopolitical contexts is often interpretive and inferential, not definitive.
- The rapidly evolving situation, especially in post-2021 Afghanistan, means ongoing developments could alter conclusions.

Despite these challenges, source triangulation and thorough thematic analysis offer a solid basis for understanding the legacy of the U.S.-Iraq War and its broader implications for global security.

Results

The research shows that the U.S.-Iraq War led to extensive and interconnected consequences that greatly influenced the global terrorism environment and impacted Afghanistan's political course, resulting in the Taliban regaining power. These effects encompass geopolitical, ideological, security, and humanitarian aspects.

The Transformation of Global Terrorist Networks

The dismantling of Iraq's state apparatus after the 2003 invasion led to a power vacuum that insurgent groups, especially al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), exploited. AQI later developed into ISIS (Jones, 2017). This change marked a shift from loosely affiliated terrorist cells to groups with territorial control, capable of projecting power regionally and globally (Gerges, 2016). The Iraq War also accelerated the decentralization and spread of jihadist networks throughout Europe, North Africa, and Southeast Asia (Byman D. L., 2015).

Increased Radicalization and Recruitment

The view of the war as illegitimate - heightened by the failure to locate weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and reports of abuses like those at Abu Ghraib prison - fuelled resentment and radicalization throughout the Muslim world (Lynch, 20123). Extremist groups used these narratives to portray their actions as defensive jihad, resulting in more local and foreign fighters being recruited. (Hoffman, 2014).

Regional Destabilization and Expansion of Iran's Influence

The ousting of Saddam Hussein, a Sunni leader, resulted in the rise of Shi'a political groups closely aligned with Iran, boosting Tehran's influence across Iraq and the broader Middle East (Katzman, 2009). This change deepened Sunni-Shi'a sectarian conflicts, which helped fuel the emergence of Sunni extremist groups like ISIS (Levitt, 2015). Additionally, the

breakdown of centralized authority intensified proxy wars in Syria and Yemen, further complicating regional security issues. (Lister, 2017).

Diverted Strategic Focus and the Taliban's Regrowth

The U.S. military's emphasis on Iraq diverted attention from stabilization initiatives in Afghanistan, enabling the Taliban to regain its operational strength over nearly twenty years (Rashid, 2010) (Giustozzi, 2019). This oversight helped the Taliban rebrand as a nationalist movement and ultimately regain power after the U.S. withdrawal in 2021. (Jones S. G., 2021).

The Erosion of Trust in Western-Led Interventions

The controversial rationale behind the Iraq War, along with its human and economic toll, undermined the credibility of Western interventions worldwide (Parker, 2006; Chomsky, 2007). This skepticism from the public and politicians grew, affecting the rapid and chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan (Malkasian, 2021).

Long-Term Humanitarian Consequences

Decades of conflict led to mass displacement, infrastructure destruction, and trauma passed down through generations in Iraq and Afghanistan (Group, 2018). The reemergence of the Taliban reversed advances in women's rights and education in Afghanistan, highlighting the profound societal effects of these conflicts (2020, 2020).

Discussion

This research highlights the significant and complex effects of the U.S.-Iraq War on global terrorism trends and political changes in Afghanistan, leading to the Taliban's comeback. The war served as a crucial turning point, altering terrorist networks, shifting regional power structures, and changing international views on military intervention.

First, the shift of terrorist groups from decentralized cells to territorially controlled entities, like ISIS, highlights the unintended effects of dismantling the Iraqi state. This change challenged conventional counterterrorism strategies by producing actors driven by both ideology and territorial goals, making international security efforts more complex. The evidence supports research that shows the collapse of Iraqi institutions provided ideal conditions for extremist ideas to develop and extend beyond the country's borders (Gerges, 2016).

Secondly, the increase in radicalization and recruitment underscores the importance of narratives in conflict dynamics. The perceived injustice of the invasion, along with images of civilian suffering and abuses, served as

effective propaganda for extremist recruitment globally (Hoffman, 2014). This indicates that military actions lacking apparent legitimacy can unintentionally strengthen violent groups by giving them a strong ideological justification.

Thirdly, Iran's regional destabilization and growing influence highlight the complex relationship between sectarian politics and international conflicts. The strengthening of Shi'a groups in Iraq altered the regional power balance, deepening sectarian tensions and fueling proxy wars. This situation shows how local power vacuums can trigger chain reactions, affecting wider geopolitical rivalries (Jeremiah Goulka, 2009).

Shifting strategic attention from Afghanistan to Iraq had considerable effects on the Taliban's resurgence. The extended focus on Iraq drained resources and political commitment, hindering efforts to stabilize Afghanistan and allowing the Taliban to reemerge. This illustrates common critiques of U.S. foreign policy, highlighting the dangers of overextension and the importance of consistent, well-planned strategies in conflict areas (Rashid, 2010).

Furthermore, the decline in trust toward Western-led interventions has had enduring effects on global security policy. The controversial basis of the Iraq War and its expensive aftermath have increased public skepticism, limited future military actions, and hindered international collaboration. This mistrust likely played a role in the disorderly U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, highlighting the lasting impact of Iraq on later foreign policy choices (Malkasian, 2021).

Ultimately, the long-term humanitarian impacts emphasize the human toll of these conflicts. The escalating crises in Iraq and Afghanistan show that warfare affects more than just immediate violence, causing deep societal trauma and hindering development. The Taliban's resurgence, in particular, risks undoing advancements in human rights and gender equality, underscoring how fragile these gains are when reliant on international backing.

In summary, this research highlights the significance of understanding the lasting and interconnected effects of military interventions. It shows how events in one area can influence regions and events over time, affecting ideologies, power dynamics, and humanitarian conditions. Future policies should incorporate these insights to prevent repeating cycles that lead to instability and conflict.

Conclusions

This research examines the lasting effects of the U.S.-Iraq War, highlighting its transformative influence on global terrorism and its indirect but significant role in the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan.

Originally seen as a necessary response to perceived threats from weapons of mass destruction and terrorism, the war has unfolded into a complex story of unintended consequences, regional instability, and strategic errors.

The findings show that the war not only dismantled the Iraqi state but also enabled violent non-state groups like al-Qaeda in Iraq and later ISIS to rise. This represented a significant shift in global terrorism, moving from dispersed, secretive cells to a hybrid approach of insurgency and governance that could control territory and carry out international attacks. The ideological void and disorder in post-invasion Iraq created ideal conditions for jihadist recruitment, radicalization, and foreign fighters.

At the same time, the war triggered a significant geopolitical shift in the Middle East. The overthrow of a Sunni-led regime and the emergence of Shi'a political groups allied with Iran altered sectarian dynamics and heightened regional tensions. These developments destabilized Iraq and extended into Syria, Yemen, and other areas, contributing to a widespread atmosphere of insecurity and proxy conflicts.

Importantly, the U.S. prioritized Iraq, which diverted attention away from long-term stabilization in Afghanistan. This shift allowed the Taliban to rebuild, rebrand, and slowly regain influence - leading to their complete return to power after the U.S. withdrew in 2021. The close links between these conflicts show how focusing on Iraq indirectly compromised progress in Afghanistan, with significant repercussions for regional and global security.

Beyond the battlefield, the Iraq War diminished global confidence in Western-led interventions. The lack of WMDs, ongoing insurgency, and humanitarian costs challenged the moral grounds for foreign actions and shifted global opinions on U.S. foreign policy. This increasing doubt was evident in the hesitant and chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, highlighting how the Iraq War's repercussions continue to influence international decisions.

Finally, the human toll of these conflicts remains immense. Iraq and Afghanistan still face humanitarian crises, societal division, and generational trauma. The decline in human rights, especially for women and marginalized groups in Afghanistan, highlights that military successes do not automatically lead to lasting peace or progress.

In conclusion, the impact of the U.S.-Iraq War extends beyond national borders and military timelines. It has significantly reshaped global terrorism, changed regional power balances, and facilitated the resurgence of authoritarian regimes claiming stability. Recognizing these interconnected effects is crucial for scholars, policymakers, and international stakeholders who wish to learn from history and develop more responsible, ethical, and sustainable strategies for international security and rebuilding after conflicts.

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