

## EPILOGUE

### “TELL ME HOW THIS ENDS”

AS ONE MIGHT EXPECT, unpreparedness, ineptitude, and hubris on the part of the United States and its coalition allies in the invasion and occupation of Iraq exacted a steep price. It exacted a price from the U.S.: from the budget of the federal government, from American citizens (at least those from military families), and from the U.S.'s diplomatic and moral standing across the world, especially in the Middle East. Yet, unquestionably, Iraq and the Iraqi people paid the lion's share of the price, and will continue to do so for years to come. Within weeks after it had begun, Operation *Iraqi Freedom* had opened a Pandora's box of forces inside and outside Iraq that today still threaten to tear the country apart. As of early 2015, the possibility of closing that box is in serious doubt. For that reason, it is too early to write a comprehensive account of the U.S. occupation and its consequences. The consequences are still playing out. Because of them, although U.S. combat troops were withdrawn by the end of 2011, the U.S. has lately resumed air-strikes in Iraq.

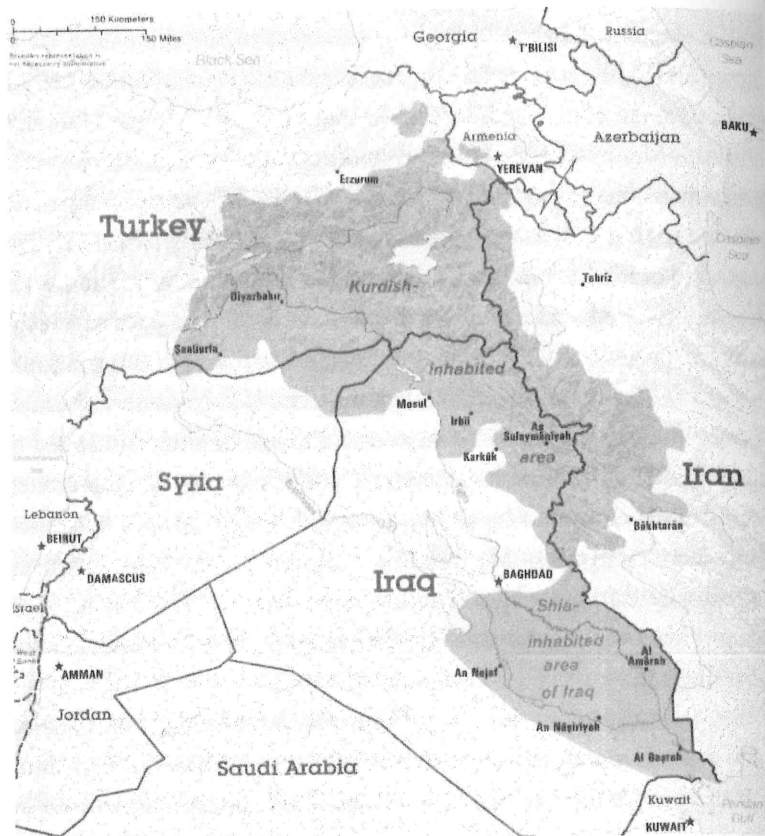
Meanwhile, dozens of historians, journalists, and think-tank “experts” have analyzed the military operations of 2003–11, the resistance to them on the part of both Iraqis and those jihadists and others who came to Iraq to fight the U.S.-led coalition, and their effects on Iraqi politics and society. Overall, the fighting has wreaked colossal damage on Iraq. Although a detailed account and assessment of all of this are beyond the scope and purpose of this book, we can at least outline some of the

most significant developments and consequences of this tragic, and still unfolding, episode of Iraq's history.

Except in the Kurdish region, where the U.S. had been perceived as a liberator as early as the 1990s, almost from the beginning the invasion spawned insurgency against the occupation across the country, especially in the so-called "Sunni Triangle" around Baghdad and in the Anbar region of western Iraq – notably in the city of Fallujah, which U.S. forces devastated in 2004 – and also in the Shi'ite south, where a militia (the "Mahdi Army") affiliated with the young mullah Muqtada al-Sadr (son of the Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr) battled the Americans in and around Najaf. That insurgency was stoked by an ill-advised decision by L. Paul Bremer, the American proconsul installed after the coalition's takeover, to disband the Iraqi army and outlaw the Baath Party. Disbanding the army left thousands of Iraqi soldiers unemployed and Iraqi officials uprooted, with dim prospects of supporting themselves and their families, and correspondingly dim attitudes toward the occupation. After thirteen months, Bremer was replaced with a politician hand-picked by the U.S.: Ayad Allawi, a long-time expatriate, secularist Shi'ite and former Baath Party member whom Saddam had once tried to assassinate. By 2005, political pushback by the Shi'ite clerical hierarchy in Najaf – most notably, the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq's most revered Shi'ite religious leader – forced the U.S. to acquiesce to a series of elections, beginning in 2005, as well as the drafting of a new constitution to structure the new Iraqi republic. In sum, the initial round of elections, which were largely boycotted by Sunni Arabs, and the new constitution yielded a political landscape riven by the same ethnic and sectarian mistrust that had plagued Iraqis since well before Saddam's time: Arabs vs. Kurds vs. Turkmen; Sunni vs. Shi'ites, with Christians and Yazidis also in the mix. Because of the Shi'ites' demographic predominance, Shi'ite Arab political parties – including al-Da'wa and S.C.I.R.I., renamed the Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq (I.S.C.I.) – backed by their respective militias, came to dominate the government.

The elections of 2006 brought to power as prime minister a little-known and lightly regarded figure, the leader of al-Da'wa, Nuri al-Maliki, whose ascension was blatantly orchestrated by the U.S. In the years that followed, Maliki steadily concentrated both civil and military power in his own, increasingly authoritarian hands. His security agencies resorted to severe and widespread repression of Sunnis, whom Maliki suspected of working to thwart the new Shi'ite ascendancy. Thousands were imprisoned and intimidated, even tortured. The pace of executions by his government became a cause of concern to international human-rights organizations. Nonetheless, the U.S. government under George W. Bush as well as his successor, Barack Obama, continued to regard Maliki as Iraq's most dependable political leader, and intervened to ensure his continuation as Iraq's prime minister after the disputed Iraqi elections in 2010. Many across the Arab Middle East perceived Iraq's Shi'ite-dominated government as doubly flawed in having been brought to power and sustained by the United States and in being linked to Shi'ite Iran.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, in many ways, the dysfunction and failure that have plagued Iraq's politics since 2003 pale in comparison with the damage done to Iraq's people. The destabilization and harsh conditions caused by invasion and foreign occupation, the political ascent of the Shi'ites at the Sunnis' expense, and the provocations of foreign Sunni jihadists pried farther apart the ethnic and religious fault lines of Iraq's society. In February 2006, Sunni extremists bombed and partially destroyed the Shi'ite al-Askariya mosque in Samarra, which contained the tombs of the tenth and eleventh Shi'ite Imams and is revered as the place where the twelfth "Hidden" Imam is said to have disappeared. This kicked off a period of massive Shi'ite reprisals against Sunnis, and vice versa, which drastically reshaped the demography of Baghdad. Sunnis expelled Shi'ites from predominantly Sunni neighborhoods; Shi'ites expelled Sunnis from theirs. Both sides resorted to kidnapping and murder. By the time the worst of the blood-letting had abated in 2009, thousands



MAP 7. Iraq and surrounding countries, with Shia-inhabited and Kurdish-inhabited regions (Central Intelligence Agency).

had been killed, and the map of Baghdad had been dramatically altered not only by sectarian violence but also by the massive concrete blast walls the U.S. military erected to separate antagonistic groups and stifle the carnage. From being a mixed Sunni-Shi'ite city, Baghdad became eighty-five to ninety percent Shi'ite.

Iraq suffered an apocalyptic toll in destroyed or displaced humanity. Internal and external exiles, combined, number as many as 4.5 million. More than two million Iraqis, most of them Sunni, fled into exile in

neighboring countries – mainly Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan, where they became an enormous burden for already taxed infrastructure. Another 2.4 million became “internal exiles” inside Iraq.<sup>2</sup> Most have chosen not to return home. The prospects that await them upon their eventual return are grim.

The number of Iraqis killed between March 2003 and the departure of U.S. forces at the end of 2011 has been estimated at between 100,000 and one million, with hundreds of thousands more maimed physically or devastated psychologically, perhaps irreparably. Tens of thousands of women were made widows – a horrific toll in a traditional society in which men are looked to as protectors and providers. Iraq's future has been made even grimmer with the millions of children who were orphaned, made homeless, or emotionally incapacitated by the death of family members, the destruction of their homes, their uprooting from their communities, or the interruption or termination of their education.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond the toll of lives lost or ruined, by the time of the U.S. withdrawal thousands of Iraqis were still contending with damaged infrastructure, shoddy or incomplete reconstruction of facilities, and other effects of war. Electricity, sanitation, and water supply remained woefully deficient. Sewage still flowed in the streets of many towns; water supplies remained polluted and unreliable; and electricity was, for too many, in short supply, with outages of sixteen hours per day common.

From once being a cradle of religions and exemplar of religious diversity, Iraq between 2003 and 2011 suffered the displacement, exile, and killing of thousands from its other religious minorities. Among them were hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Christians. Before the 2003 invasion, Iraq's Christians may have numbered as many as 1.5 million. By late 2010, their numbers across had declined to perhaps as few as 400,000; in Mosul alone, their numbers had dropped from 100,000 to maybe five thousand. Some have compared this exodus of

Iraq's Christians, descendants of some of the world's oldest Christian communities, to the near disappearance of Iraq's ancient Jewish community in 1948.<sup>4</sup> One writer noted the irony that the decisions of two professedly devout Christians, George Bush and Tony Blair, "led to the destruction of Christianity in one of its ancient heartlands – something Arab, Mongol and Ottoman conquests all failed to pull off."<sup>5</sup> Also among Iraq's displaced religious communities were hundreds of members of its ancient Mandaean and Yazidi sects.

Similarly devastated by the invasion and its aftermath was the cultural heritage of Iraq. Beginning with the looting of the National Museum of Iraq after the U.S. conquest of Baghdad in March 2003, the remains of ancient Mesopotamia – the cradle of civilizations and empires – suffered grave, even irreparable damage. Babylon was seriously damaged by coalition troops who established a military base atop the site. Many other sites – including ancient cities such as Isin and Umma – were looted, mostly by local Iraqis, but sometimes by coalition troops. Countless artifacts were illegally spirited out of the country and into the hands of antiquities dealers and their clients.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, one of the evils loosed by the invasion now threatens to destroy modern Iraq as a unitary state. Under Saddam Hussein's regime, al-Qaeda had no significant presence in Iraq. But the invasion caused Sunni jihadists to flock to Iraq. Under the banner of al-Qaeda in Iraq (A.Q.I.) they attacked U.S. forces, whom they labeled "Crusaders" as well as "Christian, Protestant, and Jewish Zionists." They were able to take control of some Sunni communities, especially in the western province of Anbar, but their brutal high-handedness soon led many to turn against them. In what became known as the Anbar or Sunni Awakening (or "Sahwa"), local Sunni Arab fighters, with assistance from U.S. forces and promises of future employment from the Shi'ite-dominated government in Baghdad, recovered their communities from the jihadists and largely succeeded in driving them out. But in the aftermath the Baghdad government reneged on its promises and imprisoned many of the Sahwa

fighters. In late 2010, as the withdrawal of U.S. forces gathered steam and American news media decamped from Iraq, A.Q.I. began to re-emerge, notably in Mosul, Anbar, and Baghdad. It launched attacks to undermine the Shi'ite-dominated government, assassinating security forces and members of the Sahwa militias, bombing government ministries and other buildings in Baghdad, and wreaking havoc with bombs in the poverty-ridden Shi'ite neighborhood of Sadr City in Baghdad and during Shi'ite religious observances there and in Karbala. After U.S. troops departed from Iraq at the end of 2011, these attacks escalated. The Maliki government made little effort to address the growing frustration of Anbar's Sunni citizenry and instead intensified its repression of them. Thousands of Sunnis vented their anger in large protests, which Maliki's forces put down violently, killing many demonstrators and stoking Sunni mistrust in Maliki's government.

For much of the world outside the Middle East these events passed unnoticed. Many of the Western media had left Iraq before the U.S. troops completed their withdrawal. The Western public had turned the page and begun to consign Iraq to the dustbin of history. But they began to notice the Sunni jihadists when they emerged as highly motivated and effective front-line soldiers in the civil war that erupted in 2011 in neighboring Syria. In that year, Syria's President, Bashar al-Assad, deployed his military to smash the predominantly Sunni cities and towns where locals, inspired by the pro-democracy "Arab Spring" in Tunisia and Egypt and frustrated with the government's failure to provide economic relief, had risen in protest. Assad and much of his ruling cohort belong to the Alawites, a quasi-Shi'ite sect who, like Shi'ites, are reviled as heretics by Sunni jihadi groups. Al-Qaeda in Iraq thus joined the fight in a sectarian cause against a regime that it saw as dominated by heretics. In 2013, they broke with the al-Qaeda leadership and declared themselves a separate organization, which came to be known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Shams (I.S.I.S.) or, alternatively, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (I.S.I.L.).<sup>7</sup>

By early 2014, the threat that I.S.I.S. also posed to Iraq's Shi'ite-led government could no longer be ignored. It had also become apparent that I.S.I.S. was working in conjunction with other Sunni groups in Iraq, including remnants of the Baath Party and Saddam-era Iraqi military. Given the burgeoning anti-Maliki animosity in the broader Sunni population, it perhaps was predictable that when I.S.I.S. forces attacked Fallujah and other cities in Anbar province, local Sunnis resisted Maliki's Shi'ite-dominated Iraqi army when it was dispatched ostensibly to defend them. I.S.I.S. gained control of Fallujah and much of Anbar. In June, alarms sounded in the Western political establishment when I.S.I.S. took control of Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city. They also attacked Saddam's home city of Tikrit and began to press southward into Iraq's Shi'ite heartland.

Ominously, I.S.I.S. renamed themselves as, simply, the Islamic State (I.S.) and proclaimed the re-establishment of the religious cum imperial institution that epitomized the apogee of Muslim rule centuries before: the caliphate. But this new caliphate's rule has manifested none of the religious toleration that characterized the rule of the Abbasid caliphs of Baghdad's golden age. It espouses a grotesque, often gruesome version of hyper-Sunni Wahhabist ideology – the same ideology that underpins the modern Saudi monarchy. Islamic State forces have perpetrated mass executions of “heretic” Shi'ite soldiers of the Iraqi army. They have beheaded Western journalists and publicized these acts by videotaping and broadcasting them. They also seem bent on eliminating what remains of Iraq's Christian and Yazidi minorities.

Finally, in their prohibitions, per their Wahhabi ideology, against buildings and art that they deem contravene strict monotheism because they encourage idolatry, I.S. has engaged in a wholesale assault on Iraq's cultural heritage. Ancient churches and mosques – including the shrine of the prophet Jonah in Mosul – have been demolished. The ruins of Hatra are in peril, as are the palaces of the Assyrian kings at Nineveh and Nimrud. And in a quest as cynical as it is destructive, archaeological

mounds across I.S. territory are being pillaged for antiquities that can be sold to help finance their rule.

As of this writing, I.S. controls much of northern and northwestern Iraq as well as eastern and northern Syria. The U.S. and a host of partners European, Arab, and (unofficially) Iranian have brought air-strikes and other military power to bear on I.S. forces. But for the foreseeable future Iraq's predominantly Sunni west and northwest have been wrested from Baghdad's writ.

Meanwhile, the Kurdistan Regional Government (K.R.G.) continues to dominate northern Iraq's Kurdish provinces, even as I.S. forces threaten their borders. When the Iraqi army fled in disarray from the I.S. onslaught, Kurdish forces seized the opportunity to grab their long-coveted “Jerusalem”: the city of Kirkuk, along with the oil beneath the surrounding earth. Few predict they will ever give it back to the government in Baghdad. More are predicting that before long – despite the opposition of the U.S., which wants to preserve Iraq as a unitary state – the K.R.G. will declare itself an independent Kurdish state.

As early as 2005, some American observers were touting the wisdom of partitioning Iraq into three separate regions – one Shi'ite, one Sunni, one Kurdish. Whether Iraq is to be a centralized state, a loose federation, or some melding of those two principles – or whether a state named Iraq will even exist in a few years – remains an open question.

At the end of 2011, Patrick Cockburn, one of the most informed and prescient journalists writing about Iraq, noted that “The most likely future for Iraq is fragile stability with a permanently high level of violence, presided over by a divided and dysfunctional government.” In the same essay, he also wrote, “Iraq is unlikely to break apart because all communities have an interest in getting their share of the oil revenues. Most disputes are about how to cut up the cake of national wealth.”<sup>8</sup>

Current events may be overtaking Cockburn's analysis.<sup>9</sup> Whatever political-geographical disposition of Iraq ensues, the fact remains that if the Iraqi people are ever to rebuild their economy and regain a



standard of living akin to what was achieved in the 1970s, that recovery will need to be founded on what rulers of Iraq have relied on since the days of the Sumerians: its natural wealth. From the time of Gilgamesh to the Abbasid caliphate of Baghdad, that wealth was extracted, hard earned, from the rich floodplain soil that, when irrigated and properly cultivated, yielded the massive grain harvests that made Mesopotamia's great cities, kingdoms, empires, and civilizations possible. Today Iraqis are confronted by a terrible irony: what was a breadbasket of the pre-modern world must now import much of its food. More than thirty years of war and sanctions, persisting drought, and dam construction in neighboring Syria and Turkey, which has reduced the life-giving flow of the Tigris and Euphrates into Iraq, have dramatically reduced Iraq's water supply, causing farmland and villages to be abandoned. Compounding those challenges, the projected effects of global warming promise to rob Iraq of even more farmland as the level of the Persian Gulf rises and salt water encroaches upstream along the Tigris and Euphrates and into the floodplain soils.

In another glaring irony, Iraqi farmers are being forced off grain fields and date plantations – the pre-modern engine of Mesopotamia's wealth – by the imperatives of the modern engine: oil production.<sup>10</sup> It was the prospect of oil that attracted Europeans to Iraq after World War I; it was ramped-up oil production and a spike in oil prices that enabled Saddam to build Iraq into a regional power with a modern standard of living; it was oil supply and profits that helped motivate the U.S. to invade Iraq and remove Saddam Hussein in 2003. Future revenue from the sale of its oil could bring a new dawn to Iraqis, but that can happen only if political, sectarian, and ethnic fissures can somehow be soldered shut and the struggle to end inter-community violence be won. The prospects of greater oil revenue are also dimmed by the fact that, after so many years of war and sanctions, Iraq's oil-production infrastructure – its wells, pumping facilities, pipelines, port facilities, and general export capacity – is badly damaged and underdeveloped – and in some

places on the brink of collapse. It cannot be repaired or replaced without massive investment from outsiders: according to Iraq's Deputy Prime Minister for Energy, at least U.S.\$30 billion per year if Iraq is to meet production targets established in 2013.<sup>11</sup>

Outside investors can hardly be expected to inject new capital if the current security situation cannot be stabilized. Yet such investment could bring a huge payoff. As we noted, the geology of Iraq's oilfields makes its oil relatively easy to extract, and its southern fields are near a major Persian Gulf port at Umm Qasr. Iraq's proven oil reserves are 150 billion barrels (worth around U.S.\$10 trillion), placing them fifth in the world and second in O.P.E.C., behind only Saudi Arabia; Iraq passed Iran into second place in 2012. Moreover, as a recent U.S. government report has noted, "just a fraction of Iraq's known fields are in development, and Iraq may be one of the few places left where much of its hydrocarbon resources has not been fully exploited." The undeveloped fields are thought to contain many billions of barrels more.<sup>12</sup> Iraq also has an abundance of another lucrative energy source: natural gas, with proven reserves of three trillion cubic meters. Like its oil, Iraq's natural gas is severely under-exploited; in fact, more than sixty percent of its current natural-gas production is flared – in other words, lost. Today, "Iraq's five natural-gas processing plants...sit mostly idle."<sup>13</sup>

By late 2013, oil companies from many nations – China, Russia, South Korea, Malaysia, and Turkey among the state-owned companies; the U.S., Italy, Britain, France, and Norway among the private ones – had signed deals to help Iraq develop its oilfields. If we choose to think of earlier outsiders, like the Mongol khan Hulegu and his horde, who came to grab a share of Iraq's wealth as "barbarians at the gate," we might think of their early twenty-first-century counterparts as suitors at the front door. Hulegu's onslaught cursed Iraq with devastation and ensuing centuries of decline caused by wrecking of the irrigation systems that sustained its primary resource – its agricultural bounty. But in their quest for Iraq's other great resource – its fossil-fuel energy

sources – the newly arriving outsiders may bring a curse that has the potential to blight our entire planet. That curse is bound up with the ever-growing demand for oil to fuel the economies of emerging countries across the world. Perhaps ironically, two of those countries – India and China – are, like Iraq, countries where great civilizations arose in antiquity and gave birth to sophisticated cultures and long histories of empire followed by Western intrusion. But because they lack adequate domestic sources of oil, both China and India can sustain their rise only by ensuring access to foreign sources. It should come as no surprise then that China is heavily invested in Iraq's oil and natural gas – and it has also invested heavily in the oil of Iraq's now friendly neighbor, Iran. That both Iraq and Iran could become a locus of competition – even conflict – over access to the vast resources that lie beneath their soil is a possibility that we would be foolish to ignore.

But, of course, as climate scientists have been warning us for years, we are even more foolish to ignore the burgeoning impacts of man-made climate change and global warming. If we hope to head off those potentially catastrophic impacts, traditional industrial powers like the U.S. and Europe, and up-and-comers like China and India, need to transform their economies – and ways of life in general – by developing energy sources other than fossil fuels.

And that, of course, means leaving a huge portion of Iraq's fossil fuels in the ground. Iraq's current leaders are counting desperately on the wealth that harvesting those fuels will produce. Such wealth would dwarf the wildest imaginings of Gilgamesh and Nebuchadnezzar, or Harun ar-Rashid, or even Faisal ibn Husayn and Nuri al-Said. But what if producing it – and burning all those fuels – ultimately brings the entire planet to ruin?

In 2003, as "Mission Accomplished" in Iraq had begun to tail-spin into insurgency and civil war, General David Petraeus made during an interview an offhanded comment that arguably has come to epitomize Iraq's situation since then: "Tell me how this ends." As of this writing,

the answer must be: "To be determined," although recent events inspire little optimism. Yet, whatever the ultimate fate of Iraq as a unitary state, we in the West ought to find in Mesopotamia/Iraq's long history much to admire, much to learn from, and even more to be grateful for. Surely the people of Iraq will continue to find in that history a source of well- and hard-earned pride – pride that might steady them along their path forward into an uncertain future.