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Iraq, Libya, Syria, and the Long Shadow of American Interventionism

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You'd be forgiven if, while looking at recent headlines about Iraq, you thought it was the aughts again. Fallujah, the site of some of the most intense fighting during the U.S. war in Iraq, is again at the center of political violence in that country. Over the weekend, the city fell to Al Qaeda-linked fighters who declared an independent Islamist state there. Iraq's prime minister Nouri al-Maliki, in power since 2006, has urged residents in Fallujah to fight back. Neighboring Iran, meanwhile, has offered to help expel Al Qaeda from the city while last month Iraq turned to the United States, requesting it send drones and missiles to help battle the Al Qaeda-linked Islamists. Seventy-five Hellfire missiles reportedly arrived in Iraq on December 19, and drones were supposed to be on their way, too. The fighting in Fallujah was a culmination of a year of increasing political violence in Iraq. The United Nations reported 7,818 civilians were killed in Iraq in 2012, a casualty level not seen since the years of the Iraq War.

But while the withdrawal of U.S. combat troops from the country in December 2011 marked the end of the American war there, it did not, and could not, mark the end of the influence of the war on events in Iraq. Instead, what's happening in Iraq follows the American war, not just chronologically but consequentially. It's the legacy of foreign policy interventionism in action, and a template from which the contours of the aftermath of subsequent American interventionism can be teased.

Iraq was last gripped with the kind of insurgency its government is facing today in 2006. Then, too, the country was on the brink of civil war. George W. Bush responded to the “thumping” in the domestic midterm elections that year, results due in part to the deteriorating situation in Iraq, by implementing a troop “surge” that saw more than 20,000 extra boots on the ground deployed in 2007. That surge, and the concurrent “Anbar Awakening” that was a Sunni backlash to Al Qaeda tactics in the country, was followed by a decline in violence in late 2007 and 2008, something for which American military leaders were quick to take credit. Irrespective of just how much American action influenced the drop in violence, that lull created the space for the U.S. and Iraq to negotiate a status of forces agreement that would see an end to American combat operations in Iraq. President Obama tried, and failed, to secure a delay of the withdrawal of troops, wanting to leave a residual force of 10,000, a position shared by most of the Republicans who vied to challenge Obama in the 2012 election.

Yet, there’s no guarantee the presence of troops after 2011 would’ve stemmed the current wave of violence. In fact, June 2011 was the bloodiest month in two years for U.S. troops in Iraq, even as civilian fatalities were then still on the decline. It underscores the complex role American troops played in the country. Even as their operations contributed to a return to stability for Iraq, their presence contributed to destabilization. Foreign occupying forces will always have that effect, no matter the purity of their intentions.

And what about those intentions? Bush first committed the United States to an invasion of Iraq over the alleged presence of weapons of mass destruction (not found), framing Iraq as part of the broader threat from Al-Qaeda and terrorism. Eventually, long after he declared “mission accomplished,” Bush transformed the *casus belli* and goal of the war to one of spreading democracy. Yet the two goals are far from complementary. While Bush initially insisted there was a link between Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and Osama bin Laden’s Al Qaeda, a Pentagon report from the Bush administration itself eventually dispelled that notion.

But 11 years after the American invasion, Al Qaeda is a presence in Iraq like it had never been before. Did the United States defeat Al Qaeda in Iraq? Increasingly, the answer looks like a no. But the American invasion of Iraq certainly helped the terrorist organization set up shop in Iraq, something unthinkable in the Hussein era, despite the Bush Administration’s misguided assertions.

At this point, the story ought to sound familiar. Iraq isn’t the only country where Al Qaeda’s been able to establish itself because of American-induced regime change. Al Qaeda was a non-presence in Qaddafi’s Libya. No more. While *the New York Times* reported that it found no evidence Al Qaeda was involved in the 2012 attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, it did link the attack to Ansar al-Shariah, which is believed to be affiliated with Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda, testified Lt. Col. Andrew Wood, who headed an elite U.S security force in Libya before the Benghazi attack, now has a larger presence in Libya than the United States. The same Congressional hearing revealed that between ten and twenty thousand surface-to-air missiles were still missing after the conclusion of the Libyan civil war. The U.S.-backed intervention in Libya also pushed fighters, including Al Qaeda-linked insurgents, throughout the wider region, contributing to the instability that led to a French intervention in Mali last year.

Supporters of U.S. participation in the intervention in Libya insisted Obama's foray was nothing like Bush's in Iraq. On the surface, they do have several notable differences in how long they lasted, in how many U.S. troops and other military resources were committed to the fights, and in what kind of internal organized opposition to the respective repressive governments there was. Yet the effect of both interventions was broadly similar. Both had as a primary goal regime change, even though the Obama Administration insisted it wasn't targeting Col. Qaddafi up until U.S. drones helped Libyan rebels capture him. He was then sodomized and killed. Regime change had been the official U.S. policy toward Iraq since the passage of the Iraq Liberation Act in 1998; Saddam Hussein was hanged for war crimes in Iraq in 2006. Both changes created a fragile security situation, one exploited by Al Qaeda and Al Qaeda-linked forces, both in the countries themselves and in the wider region. It is hard to deny, for example, that Al Qaeda is able to exert influence on the Syrian rebellion in large part because of the sanctuary it has carved out for itself in Iraq.

The lessons of Iraq and the folly of intervention may seem self-evident, even to those lawmakers in Washington who backed the war, but the applicability of those lessons to future interventions, and not merely future interventions involving large numbers of troops in Asia and possibly someone named Bush, remains elusive for those same people. Secretary of State John Kerry, for example, insisted a U.S.-backed intervention in Syria wouldn't look anything like the Iraq war, because there would be no troops on the ground. But aside even from questions about how Russia, an ally of the Syrian regime's, might respond to a U.S.-led intervention, there's little doubt intervention would have unintended consequences. Supporters of aggressive intervention in Syria, like John McCain, blame insufficient U.S. support for rebels on the growing influence of Al Qaeda. Yet it's a lot clearer that the U.S. intervention in Iraq helped Al Qaeda maintain a presence among Syrian rebels, just as years of U.S. intervention in Somalia arguably helped push the local Islamist insurgency group there, Al Shabaab, to affiliate with Al Qaeda. Despite the lack of more U.S. support, Syrian rebels have nevertheless begun to fight against Al Qaeda-linked Islamists in their midst.

McCain has also blamed the Obama Administration for the current resurgence of Al Qaeda in Iraq, pointing to the U.S. withdrawal as the cause. The unrepentant Iraq war apologist's inability to acknowledge the role the U.S. invasion played in providing Al Qaeda the opportunity to get a foothold in Iraq is a dangerous blind spot; when the unintended consequences of interventionism are ignored, and even misattributed to the lack of sufficient intervention, they help set the stage for future interventions and future unintended consequences. John Kerry promises U.S. support for Iraq in its battle against Al Qaeda won't include combat troops. It's "their fight," the secretary of state says. Yet the same applies to every fight the United States would intervene in. America will keep convincing itself to slay dragons around the world for as long as it lacks the patience to see other countries do it themselves.