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# Review

## ***The Legacy of Iraq: From the 2003 War to the “Islamic State”***

Benjamin Isakhan (ed). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015. 278pp.

### Kieran McConaghy\*

Benjamin Isakhan's *The Legacy of Iraq* attempts to take a holistic look at the totality of political developments and relationships in Iraq since the U.S.-led invasion in 2003. The book has contributions from more than a dozen experts in aspects of Iraq's history and politics.

Part of the strength of any edited volume is that the final product is always more than the sum of its parts. The view of Iraq that this book gives is certainly more granular and richly textured than any author could manage on their own. The sharpness of its focus on the legacy that the Iraq war has left behind add to the sense of the study as an important and impressive work. Isakhan has divided the book into four parts, addressing the aftermath of the war in terms of decisions and mistakes, Iraqi politics since the war, the state of Iraqi culture and civil society, and the regional and international implications of the conflict in turn. These notional themes give the book a sort of coherence that some edited volumes can lack. However, given the vastness of the subject and depth of knowledge of the contributing authors, there are still some points that involve bridging a wide gap. The

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juxtaposition of Philippe Le Billon's chapter on the politics of Iraq's oil wealth with Aloysia Brooks' on torture in Abu-Ghraib seem jarring. At the same time, the completely separated discussion of the Kurdish "problem" by Liam Anderson and Iraq's "ultra-minorities" means that the chance to deal holistically with the position of minorities since the U.S. withdrawal has been missed. Issues such as sectarianism, ethnic violence, and Shia consolidation of power are themes that spring up in all sections. Given their central importance to an appreciation of post-Saddam Iraq, this is understandable.

Perhaps Isakhan in putting together this collection has attempted to do too much at once. His own contributions to the book of three chapters, an introduction and conclusion have convinced me that he could have proffered a short monograph of his own on post-conflict Iraq with little extra effort, given his record of insightful and incisive work on the country. Nevertheless, the high calibre of the majority of the chapters and breadth of topics they cover demonstrate an area ripe for more scholarly attention. Indeed, no serious academic ought to offer their thoughts on the cause, character and likely fate of jihadism in Iraq and the Syrian Civil War without an understanding of the interwoven travails faced by Iraq both before and after the U.S.-led invasion. As such, this book is essential reading for scholars and students of terrorism studies alike

In chapter one, Isakhan gives a detailed account of de-Baathification in post-Saddam Iraq. The questionable prioritisation of the process of de-baathification has allowed the Accountability and Justice Commission (AJC) to be wielded as a sectarian tool of the Shia political elite. This prioritisation gave rise to claims that the process was little more than "de-Sunnification" (25) and a tool for hamstringing the opposition ahead of elections. The prioritisation of de-Baathification by U.S. neo-conversations, designed to echo "de-Nazification" thus failed to take heed the lessons of post-conflict reconstruction in war-torn areas in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (22). Furthermore, longstanding grievances and trauma that continues to haunt Iraq have been left largely unaddressed while state apparatus has been dismantled in the process.

Philippe Le Billon turns our attention in chapter two to the politics of Iraq's oil wealth. Critics of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq have long suspected that security of Iraq's oil for the U.S. and the west more generally, was the concealed, central reason for the military engagement. Le Billon's mention of the non-competitive award of contracts to UK and U.S. companies and the bashfulness of the two administrations in talking about oil does little to disrupt this view, even if the sheer scale of the sector and sensitivity to the potential

for negative publicity meant that they did not monopolise the market (38–39). He qualifies this, however, quoting Duffield (2012) in saying that while oil might not have been the central objective, it certainly made the decision to invade a lot easier for the U.S. and UK. Less commented upon and more useful in explaining the trajectory of Iraq in the years since 2003 is the section on the domestic implications of Iraq's oil wealth. The geographical concentration of oil in Sunni areas has led to animosity and "feelings of dispossession" amongst some Kurds and Shia, while some Sunnis fear that Kurds and Shia will exploit the arrangements to cash in disproportionately. It is clear from Le Billon's chapter that despite Iraq's considerable potential oil wealth, among the highest in the world (49) it is not benefitting the average Iraqi. Rather the U.S. intervention with respect to the oil sector has resulted in high wastage, increased sectarian animosity, and with a weakened state, has made oil a lucrative source of funding for political violence.

Aloysia Brooks' chapter on torture in Abu Ghraib powerfully brings the attention to one of the worst missteps of the entire war in Iraq. Brooks argues persuasively that the impact of the Abu Ghraib debacle did not stop at the torture, but that the flimsy judicial and political responses devalued the lives of Iraqis and irreparably sullied the reputation of the coalition as a force for protecting human rights (62). The prosecution of whistle blowers, lenient sentences for perpetrators, immunity for private contractors, and discursive relabelling of torture as "abuse" or "mistreatment," argues Brooks, have left a legacy, the enormity of which has yet to be felt.

In part two, the attention turns to Iraqi politics since Saddam. That attention goes beyond the Sunni-Shia tensions to discuss the important position of Kurds and those branded "ultra-minorities" is laudable. However, more could have been done to make these chapters speak to each other. As it stands, the chapters, each authoritative in their own right, leave us with a fragmented view of the whole. Ronen Zeidel makes excellent points about Sunni soul-searching and the formation of a new kind of Sunni political identity post-Saddam in chapter six. This identity Zeidel asserts must hinge on Sunni Muslims' role as a constitutive part of a new multi-identity Iraq, rather than on embittered sectarianism or fundamentalist religiosity (108–9). This crisis of identity is only understandable in light of the picture Isakhan paints in chapter four, on the Al-Maliki government's authoritarianism and the tendency of the Da'wa Party to build a state-within-a-state while dressing it as democratic reform. Al-Maliki's militancy, sectarianism and tendency towards increasing authoritarianism is painfully ironic, given the stated ambition of the U.S.-led

coalition in ousting Saddam in the first place. Indeed, the tone of Maliki has much to answer for in fomenting Sunni grievances in the years since 2003. If understanding the totality of relations post-Saddam is the aim of this book, then a co-authored chapter between Isakhan and Zeidel that could have looked at the interaction of Iraq's two largest political forces might have been more useful, with the impressively granular detail Isakhan gives in chapter four saved for another publication.

In chapter five, Liam Anderson's focus on the Kurdish problem since 2003 draws attention to the relative success of the Kurdistan region, and the price that might have been paid by the rest of Iraq for this. Recognition of the federally autonomous Kurdish Regional Government, language rights, control over internal security, recognition of some territorial claims and control over internal security under the 2005 constitution afforded the Kurds the most lucrative and advantageous position of any ethnic group in the post-Saddam Iraq (84). Anderson draws attention to "textual ambiguities" built into the constitution, which have since become battle grounds (84), critiquing the document's grey areas and Hamoudi's view (2013) that the document's ambiguity offers potential for Iraqi's to heal divisions. The constitutionally protected rights afforded to the Kurds has been the source of continuing animosity between Baghdad and Erbil. Anderson rounds up the chapter by offering some alternatives to the current arrangements, a welcome look beyond Iraq to existing constitutional arrangements that could work for Iraq's Kurds, though how this would be implemented and by whom is something that ultimately remains unanswered.

Nicholas Al-Jeloo's chapter on Iraq's ultra-minorities adds nuance to our understanding of a conflict that is far too often understood only through Shia, Sunni and Kurdish prisms. Indeed, these "ultra-minorities" often cut across the more well-known blocs, as well as lying outside of them. In discussing the chaotic and ineffective legislative and constitutional measures designed to give minorities protection, al-Jeloo does well to complicate the view of post-Saddam Iraq and talk about the disproportionate suffering of ultra-minorities, showing how damaging the common discourse of 'all Iraqis are suffering' is, as Chaldo-Assyrian Christians flee, Mandaean come close to being eradicated, while the tiny Jewish population post 2003 has largely gone into hiding. What is clear is that the current plight of ultra-minorities in Iraq is directly related to the U.S.-led invasion in 2003 and the failure of the coalition to take these concerns seriously enough (120). The continued existence of some of the small communities that Al-Jeloo describes remains threatened, and he asserts, nothing less than renewed legislative measures, new

constitutional protections, and harsh punishments for clerics who incite violence against these minorities will do to assure their place in the Iraq of the future.

Part Three turns to focus on the plight of Iraqi culture and civil society. A chapter from Isakhan on the relationship of the Iraqi oil unions to the Al Maliki government leads the section, followed by contributions from Perri Campbell and Luke Howie on women's rights and digital media in post-invasion Iraq, and Diane C. Siebrandt on the impact of coalition military operations on archaeological sites. Siebrandt's chapter comes as considerable attention, both scholarly and journalistic, has been paid to the destruction of antiquities and archaeological sites by jihadist organisations including Gamal Islamiyah, Al Qaeda in Iraq, and Islamic State. Siebrandt notes that, perhaps paradoxically, the "shock and awe" tactics of the initial invasion did little damage to the considerable archaeological sites in Iraq (153), but that the following occupation caused damage to a range of sites (156). Furthermore, the failure of the coalition to engage with and respect the well-established authorities for protecting cultural heritage led to alienation (159). Indeed, Siebrandt goes as far as to say that the actions of the coalition with regards to Iraq's cultural heritage during the invasion and occupation were "seen once again as a Western power practising overtly colonial rule over Iraqi sites" (159), though the author could have done more to evidence this assertion. Doubtless, the way in which the coalition's poorly planned invasion impacted Iraq's archaeological sites and cultural heritage would not have been well received, but including the voice of Iraqis on the matter would have added weight to this chapter.

Ranj Alaaldin tackles the topic of Shia ascendancy in Iraq and its role in the wider process of sectarian polarisation of the Middle East. With the fall of Saddam, Iraq became a battlefield in a sectarian proxy war fought by Iraq's neighbours (181). Alaaldin argues that this was possible since in the violent containment that had existed under Saddam removed, pre-existing divisions festered and conflict intensified. The lack of a party that represented Sunni concerns once the Baath Party had been banned led to tensions as their Shia counterparts mobilised politically. The sectarian tensions in Iraq thus played directly into tensions on the regional level and long-standing Sunni fears of a Shia crescent forming from Tehran to Damascus through Baghdad (189). The repercussions on the region are clear to be seen. Many of those who cut their teeth in the Iraq insurgency post-invasion continue to be active in the Syrian Civil War. The sectarian tensions of Iraq have been

mirrored at a regional level, argues Alaadlin. He remains doubtful as to what could have been done to prevent the reopening of sectarian tensions in the new Iraq.

Campbell and Howie's chapter states in stark terms the impact that the invasion, occupation and subsequent political and social developments have had on Iraqi women. First, the authors highlight how Westerners' ability to understand women's lives in Iraq is determined by the information made available in academia and the media (139). They draw from the work of Judith Butler (2009) to highlight how our understanding not just of conflict as historical event but ways of life in Iraq is necessarily mediated by these "frames of life." In this chapter as in others, the lack of planning on the part of the coalition forces ahead of the invasion and the impact this has had is thrown into sharp relief. Despite the rhetoric of the so-called liberation of Iraqi women, some measures made in the early days of the occupation abolished important legislation that had protected and advanced women's rights (142). What follows in the chapter does not purport to represent the experience of all Iraqi women or even the average experience, but in giving two personalised accounts of Iraqi women post-invasion, their experiences are heard and abstract narratives about women's rights in Iraq are humanised.

This section on civil society and culture adds colour and depth to the book that would otherwise be missing. To extend the idea of "frames," it is striking how little consideration of society and life in post-invasion Iraq is considered by academics apart from high politics, constitutional arrangements and meso and macro level issues. More work on the impact of these new arrangements on the many other aspects of culture and society are badly needed.

Having dealt mostly at the state level, the fourth and final part of the book deals with regional and international level concerns. In his chapter, Howard Adelman gives a clinical dissection of ethnic cleansing episodes in Iraq from 2002 onwards. The sheer numbers of those displaced over the course of a decade is shocking. Adelman's depiction of Iraq since the U.S.-led coalition invasion in 2003 is of an Iraq that has been permanently disfigured by ethnic conflict, ethnic cleansing and sectarianism. The mismanagement of the coalition and their failure to recognise the severity of the problem has exacerbated the problem, led to the decimation of small minority communities across Iraq, and generated a refugee problem where tens of thousands if not hundreds of thousands do not wish to return home. The knock on effect on neighbouring Syria is explained and the instability, unrest and enmity was fertile recruiting territory for ISIS amongst other militant groups.

In highlighting the international impact of the Iraq War, Joseph Camilleri draws attention to four interlinked action-reaction syndromes in which the Iraq war has brought insecurity, nuclear proliferation, great power rivalry, terrorism and politically driven sectarianism (219). Camilleri's prudent points regarding the paradox of a link to terrorism as a justification for the invasion and the subsequent foothold that terrorist groups have gained in the region because of the resulting instability is well made. While several of the other chapters take issue principally with the way in which the invasion and occupation was executed, Camilleri makes astute points about the weakening of the position of the UN Security Council and changes to international norms that the intervention has helped to catalyse (220–21).

The landscape of interventionism has changed since the Iraq War, with clear impact on the doctrines of humanitarian intervention as Binoy Kampmark notes in his contribution. The idea of the Iraq War as a humanitarian intervention is on shaky ground to begin with. A humanitarian tone to a political intervention perhaps best describes the scenario given Kampmark's emphasis on the lack of humanitarian grounds and clear political objectives of the invasion (197). This was a humanitarian mission in only the loosest sense of the term. What comes through from Kampmark's chapter is that despite efforts of later humanitarian missions to differentiate and stand in contrast to Iraq, the highly complex and idiosyncratic nature of conflicts mean that there is every chance that missteps could be made again, with interventions bringing more instability in the long term than they bring protection in the short term.

*The Legacy of Iraq* is a book that gives the reader a multi-dimensional view of the country in the years since the 2003 invasion. There is no claim by the editor or any contributor to offer the definitive treatment. In many ways, while we are maybe at a critical distance from the 2003 invasion, it might still be too early to fully assess the legacy of that decision to intervene and the character of the occupation. As I said earlier, there is overlap between the contributions of many of the authors in the book and any one of the four parts is broad enough to have commanded its own full-length book. Nevertheless, this is the first serious attempt I have seen to take a multi-level look at Iraq since the invasion. There is enough in it for the book to appeal to those in disciplines like peace and conflict, security studies, terrorism studies, strategic studies, gender, and international relations. Of course, anyone seeking to understand developments in the Middle East post-2003 would be foolish



to omit it from their reading. *The Legacy of Iraq* might not answer all the questions, but it certainly sets a few hares running and opens clear avenues for further research.

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