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To cite this article: Irene Costantini & Dylan O'Driscoll (2023) 2003–2023: A Twenty-Year Reflection of the Iraqi Invasion, Occupation and Resulting Interventions, *International Peacekeeping*, 30:5, 549-561, DOI: [10.1080/13533312.2023.2290908](https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2023.2290908)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2023.2290908>



Published online: 22 Dec 2023.



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INTRODUCTION



2003–2023: A Twenty-Year Reflection of the Iraqi Invasion, Occupation and Resulting Interventions

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ABSTRACT

2023 marks the twenty-year anniversary of the 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq. This Special Issue collects contributions that reflect on the one hand, upon changing assumptions, worldviews, and the policy paradigms informing the international intervention in Iraq; and, on the other hand, on its direct and indirect effects on the political, economic, and social developments in the country. Focusing on different themes, actors, and geographical locations, the articles collectively reaffirm the centrality of the 2003 intervention logic, which 20 years after, still haunts Iraq and whose legacy still proves prolific and conducive to understanding, interpreting, and explaining the reality on the ground as well as the evolution of international interventionism.

2023 marks the twenty-year anniversary of the invasion and occupation of Iraq. *Operation Iraqi Freedom* began on 19 March 2003, the US-led *Coalition of the Willing* soon captured the capital of Baghdad (9 April) and on 1 May, former President G.W. Bush announced the ‘end of major combat operations’.¹ Imbued with a messianic liberal zeal, the preventive military *Operation* was justified on the grounds of the *War on Terror*, the (later proved false) accusation against the regime of Saddam Hussein of holding Weapons of Mass Destruction, and normatively by the belief that ‘the establishment of a free Iraq at the heart of the Middle East’ would have been ‘a watershed event in the global democratic revolution’.² As later developments proved Bush’s Freedom Agenda to be deeply flawed, the US-led intervention was indeed, for all the wrong reasons, a watershed event on many fronts, internally, regionally, and internationally.

Internally, regime change in Iraq precipitated a drastic re-assessment and re-alignment of power relations with the regime’s inner circle and by extension, the Iraqi Sunni Arab population from which it largely drew, becoming the excluded

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¹Bush, “End of Major Combat Operations in Iraq.”

²Bush, “Remarks to the 20th Anniversary.”

from what developed since the very beginning as a 'victor's peace',³ whose consequences branched out in the following years through the affirmation of the *Muhasasa Ta'ifia* – Iraq's sectarian apportionment system of governance. Regionally, the 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq triggered an initial fragmentation in the existing regional order: since then, the politicization of sectarianism became the fault line that later shook the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in the wake of the Arab uprisings. Internationally, the intervention carried out by a selected *Coalition of the Willing* and not authorized by the United Nations revealed all the contradictions between the rule-based and the power-based logic of the liberal international order. These contradictions went on to engulf any later attempts at conflict management and resolution within and outside the MENA region and caused a rift within and between Western and non-Western actors over peace operations.

The significance of the twenty-year anniversary of the invasion and occupation of Iraq motivates this special issue, which through a medium-term perspective, reflects on the intended and unintended consequences both for Iraq and for international interventions, more generally. From the perspective of Peace and Conflict Studies, the 2003 Iraqi intervention represents an exception to interventions in conflict-affected contexts for its preventive, unauthorized nature, and for being the result of an invasion rather than of a pre-existing conflict in need for being settled.⁴ Simultaneously, it represents, together with Afghanistan, the apex of international interventions in conflict-affected contexts framed along the logic of the liberal peace/statebuilding, as testified by the amount of political and financial resources spent in and on the country⁵ and by the degree of intrusion into the domestic affairs of the state intervened upon. Lastly, and, once again together with Afghanistan, it marked the beginning of a normative downturn among Western actors in the view that liberal peace/statebuilding may constitute a solution to conflict-affected contexts. As Lake so aptly puts it, 'Iraq is the crucible in which post-Cold War theories of statebuilding were tested, found wanting, and then, in the heat of battle, forged anew'.⁶

A twenty-year perspective since the invasion and occupation of Iraq allows the collection of articles in this special issue to reflect upon changing assumptions, worldviews, and the policy paradigms informing the international intervention in Iraq and the field of conflict management and resolution, which over the last few years has witnessed an overall stalemate, partly related to the failures in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁷ Amid a constant

³Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism*, 462.

⁴Paris, *At War's End: Building Peace*; Mako and Edgar, "Evaluating the Pitfalls of External Statebuilding."

⁵According to SIGIR (2013, 55), only for the period 2003–2012, the US alone spent around USD 60 billion.

⁶Lake, *The Statebuilder's Dilemma*, 101.

⁷Chandler, *Peacebuilding: The Twenty Years' Crisis*; Pospisil, *Peace in Political Unsettledness*; Kustermans, Sauer, and Segaert, *A Requiem for Peacebuilding?*.

preoccupation with terrorism – from the *War on Terror* launched in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 to the *International Coalition to Defeat Daesh/ISIS* launched in 2014 – the last twenty years have seen international actors formulating and adapting, often as a reaction, different policies and practices of intervention. This is epitomized by the shifting fate of intervention buzzwords, such as democratization and liberalization; statebuilding and institution-building; good governance; stabilization; countering violent extremism and building back better social cohesion. Behind all and each of them lies different internationally framed interpretations of the objective and strategy of interventions in conflict-affected contexts.

A twenty-year perspective since the invasion and occupation of Iraq allows the collection of articles in this Special Issue to also reflect on its direct and indirect effects on the political, economic, and social developments in the country, that is an understanding of the longer-term impact of the 2003 intervention on the lives of Iraqis. Local agency in Iraq developed; adapting, reacting to, and moulding both local dynamics and international policies and practices of intervention. For instance, the Iraqi political leadership has exploited and distorted externally promoted power-sharing mechanisms in ways that impaired the potential of such governance arrangements to deal with a deeply divided society.⁸ Civil society, in its multiple forms, has had to navigate a fluid terrain amid violence and instability adapting to a variously expanding and shrinking civil space and to similarly expanding and shrinking humanitarian and reconstruction programmes.⁹ Ethno-religious minorities have acquired formal representation in the Iraqi political system, yet their role has been endangered by shifting forms of terrorism, political and governance competition, an incomplete process of national reconciliation and a growing militarization of society.¹⁰ Across all these categories, Iraqi women positioned themselves between global frameworks and local dynamics.¹¹ An assessment of international policies and practices of intervention cannot but take into account their interactions with these and other local dynamics.

What is the status of peacebuilding, conflict resolution, statebuilding, national reconciliation, and peace initiatives in the country? What does a twenty-year perspective tell us on the initial objectives of the intervention and/or on strategies of adaptation at the both the local and the international level? How does the Iraqi experience connect with changes in the field of international interventions in conflict-affected contexts and for peace? These are just some of the questions that guide this collective effort towards situating the experience of Iraq within the broader field of Peace

⁸O'Driscoll and Costantini, "Conflict Mitigation Versus Governance."

⁹Alshamary, "Postwar Development of Civil Society."

¹⁰Costantini and O'Driscoll, "Practices of Exclusion, Narratives of Inclusion."

¹¹Chilmeran, "Women, Peace and Security Across Scales."

and Conflict Studies, questioning its significance and impact in formulating policy solutions. Combining different disciplinary and methodological approaches, this special issue collects articles that reflect on the developments since 2003, by complementing top-down, institutional analysis of the intervention, occupation, and political system that followed with an understanding of its impact at the local level, in people's everyday lives.¹² Focusing on different themes, actors, and geographical locations, the articles locate peace and conflict dynamics in both war (invasion, civil war, battle against the Islamic State) and 'no peace, no war' framings¹³ through both novel theoretical lenses and empirically rich case studies.

Iraq: A Laboratory for Normative, Policy and Practice Testing

The years 2003–2023 coincided with a rich and intense period of normative formulation and practice development at the international level regarding peace operations, the result of multiple processes of expanding and deepening existing frameworks of intervention; negotiating new objectives and means of intervention; adapting policies and practices; as well as rejecting key tenets of international interventionism. In parallel to the unfolding of the intervention in Iraq, the last twenty years witnessed a twofold push towards divergent directions on matters of peace operations. On the one hand, there has been an attempt at rooting international interventions in an expansionary liberal ground, as exemplified by, among others, the affirmation and later approval of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) in the General Summit of 2005 and its application in the case of Libya;¹⁴ or the streamlining of the resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. On the other hand, there has been a retreat from such liberal bedrock, as exemplified by the disregard and rejection of the R2P following Libya, the gradual but steady affirmation of stabilization as a term and an approach;¹⁵ and the increased recourse to a pragmatic stance by actors who were previously at the forefront of sustaining the liberal grounds of interventionism.¹⁶

At the turn of the millennium, liberal statebuilding offered a solution to the securitization of state failure and fragility, which entered the Western policy vocabulary and security strategies in the 1990s. When the international threat to peace was located in, and with, the fragility of the state, liberal statebuilding provided a way out through a universalistic formula

¹²Mac Ginty and Richmond, "The Local Turn in Peace Building"; Paffenholz, "Unpacking the Local Turn in Peacebuilding."

¹³Mac Ginty, *No War, No Peace*.

¹⁴Bellamy and Williams, "The New Politics of Protection? Côte d'Ivoire."

¹⁵Zyck and Muggah, "Preparing Stabilisation for 21st Century Security Challenges"; De Coning, Karlsrud, and Aoi, *UN Peacekeeping Doctrine in a New Era*; Belloni and Moro, "Stability and Stability Operations."

¹⁶Chandler, "Resilience and Human Security"; Tocci, *Framing the EU Global Strategy*.

of institutional reset moulded on, theoretically, a Weberian-based conception of the state and, empirically, a Western-based experience applicable in all contexts. Twenty years after, state fragility and failure are hardly overcome in many contexts, including Iraq. Yet, they no longer drive international interventionism. They have been reinterpreted through the concept of resilience, which induces the international community to abandon the institutional lens in order to emphasize local capacities – to be built, but also to rely upon – as drivers of stability within an overall distancing from both universalistic formulas and ambitious goals.¹⁷

Where does Iraq rest in such broader evolution of international interventionism? Iraq certainly reflects the fate of the approaches that translated the above briefly outlined normative framework into policies and practices. Within the initial period of the intervention as statebuilding (2003–2011) different policy discourses – neo-liberal peacebuilding, counterinsurgency and informal consociationalism – interlaced in framing the US response to the situation in Iraq. While the centrality of the initial period of the intervention in Iraq is undisputable for the path it set in the country, this special issue extends its focus onwards and outwards, considering how international actors, primarily the UN, but also International Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and donors' agencies remained engaged in delineating new policies of intervention, especially following the rise of the Islamic State.

This special issue does not however stop at considering Iraq only as a reflection of broader trends in the evolution of international interventionism and instead it raises the question of the extent to which Iraq has informed such evolution. In seeking to answer this question, two considerations are due: first, in reading Iraq as a source of change in the international paradigm guiding interventions, Iraq cannot be taken separate from the concurrent mission in Afghanistan, both having lasting legacies in shaping the trajectory of liberal internationalism. While the two have separate origins and evolved along different paths, they have both been widely recognized as the heyday of the same paradigm – liberal statebuilding. The second consideration is that from both contexts, it is the notion of failure that has been assumed as one of the key drivers of change in the international paradigm guiding international interventions, albeit failure manifested in very different empirical forms.

Many if not all the contributions to this special issue relate implicitly or explicitly to this notion of failure, whether it is interpreted as (missed) lessons learnt (Costantini and O'Driscoll, 2022) or the preconditions that led Iraq into a certain development (Mako, 2023). However, the notion of failure travels uneasily through time and space: over a period of 20 years,

¹⁷Belloni and Costantini, "From Liberal Statebuilding to Counterinsurgency and Stabilization."

it is difficult to assess what failed according to what objectives, priorities, and means. US President Joe Biden's speech on Afghanistan, exemplified the political difficulties of situating failure in changing context:

We went to Afghanistan almost 20 years ago with clear goals: get those who attacked us on Sept. 11, 2001, and make sure Al Qaeda could not use Afghanistan as a base from which to attack us again. We did that. We severely degraded Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. We never gave up the hunt for Osama bin Laden and we got him. That was a decade ago. Our mission in Afghanistan was never supposed to have been nation-building. It was never supposed to be creating a unified, centralized democracy. Our only vital national interest in Afghanistan remains today what it has always been: preventing a terrorist attack on American homeland.¹⁸

Were the goals clear twenty years ago? Are they clear now? Did the goals change to reflect the result? Did the means of the intervention there match with the state's goals?

Rather than taking failure as a key analytical lens, Iraq (and Afghanistan) unfortunately lend credit to the view of international interventions as experimental practices, guided by changing normative beliefs, which inevitably transform intervened upon contexts into laboratories where policies and practices are constantly reformulated and adjusted. Parry and Vogel (2023) take us on a long journey illustrating the changing meanings that the UN has attributed to *the local* over time and across its humanitarian and development agencies. Similarly, Costantini and O'Driscoll (this issue) trace 20 years of security assistance showing the gradual shift from the deep-seated role of *Security Sector Reform* in liberal statebuilding to the centrality of *Security Forces Assistance* to the stabilization process. Both articles are illustrative of how Iraq has not only reflected but also nurtured the evolution of certain concepts, policies, and practices of intervention.

Drivers of Change Between the International and the Local

The last 20 years witnessed important changes in the international discourse on international interventionism that partake with the broader fate of the liberal international order, as introduced in the previous section. However, local dynamics have also witnessed important changes. When in 2005–2007 Iraq was overwhelmed by ethnosectarian conflict, few would have anticipated that years ahead, in 2019, the Iraqi youth would have transformed the securitized space of Baghdad and other cities across the country as the last bastion of genuine liberal demands, such as political participation, or gender equality in a growing movement of social mobilization.

¹⁸Biden, "Remarks by President Biden on Afghanistan."

Similarly, few would have anticipated in May 2003 when major combat operations were declared over, that the country would have tilted progressively towards Iran and be turned into a space of geopolitical competition between the US and the neighbouring country.

A thorny issue that all papers in this special issue deal with implicitly or explicitly is precisely the relationship between local and international factors in explaining the trajectory that Iraq took over the last 20 years. Key moments in the recent developments of the country prove the large disregard for local conditions, dynamics, and agency. The surprise with which the rapid expansion of the Islamic State in 2014 was met is, for instance, evidence of the marginality that local voices had prior to the events. The pre-invasion war planning and statebuilding recounted in Mako's contribution (this issue) occurred with little concern and knowledge of the local reality. Alshamary and Hadad (2023) show how the South has been largely overlooked by Iraqi and international politicians up until the 2019 Tishreen movement brought it to national and international attention. Thus, the invasion, occupation, and myriad of policies that followed, largely failed to take the needs of the Iraqi people as a starting point, and as a result, many of the same issues that the Iraqi people have faced over the last decades are still unaddressed. By doing so, successive policies of intervention fell short of anticipating or preventing events, taking instead a reactive turn in a country described as in perennial crisis.

The relative lack of attention towards the local is also found in the literature that has been produced over the last 20 years. Since 2003, scholarship on Iraq increased, especially in reaction to the first years of the invasion and occupation of Iraq and later on, to the experience of the Islamic State. The centrality of violent contention politics in the form of civil war, insurgency, and terrorism is reflected in the literature produced over the last 20 years that has disregarded other dynamics, themes, locations, and level of analysis in treating Iraq. The academic production on social mobilization triggered by the popular demonstrations of 2019 is an example of a recent trend that has expanded a field of study that has previously been overtly characterized by a security-oriented lens of analysis, enabled also by better security conditions on the ground. To this literature, it is important to add the large amount of grey literature in the form of reports and policy papers produced for or by major international organizations working in the country, often offering rich empirical evidence, but not necessarily designed to scale and uptake such knowledge.

The perspectives taken in this special issue focus on problematizing changes in the scope, mode, and means of the international intervention in Iraq and thus inevitably lean towards a reading that privileges external (f)actors. Indeed, some of the contributions (Costantini and O'Driscoll; Parry and Vogel, 2023), show how changes in international paradigms of

intervention are attributable more to changes in international discourses and conditions, rather than to local dynamics. With this, however, the special issue does not want in any way to downplay the centrality of local agency in both laying down the path that Iraq has taken and explaining certain dynamics. Collectively, we share Alshamary and Hadad's quest (this issue) for refocusing attention to a bottom-up perspective in integrating existing studies within a future research agenda.

The Invasion, Occupation, and Resulting Interventions Across Space and Time

Taking a 20-year reflection of the invasion and occupation of Iraq provides a methodological challenge; as this Introduction has demonstrated, the changing nature of engagement by international actors, lack of consistency, and different policies across time and space do not provide an easy framework of analysis. Moreover, the longevity of the intervention in its multiple and fluid forms meant that there was also a political change in the governments of those invading and intervening, bringing different political leanings and manifestos into the context. Thus, in order to reflect on this 20-year period, further periodization is needed to better understand policies of international and national actors. Time is 'relational, always connected to understandings of the past and the future as well as the present'.¹⁹ Thus, not only is there a need to bring pre 2003–2023 into the analysis, but any further periodization must take into account how these narrower periods of analysis influence and feed into each other. Within this perspective, Mako (this issue) demonstrates the importance of understanding the pre-invasion dynamics in analysing the post invasion political system, whereas all other contributors demonstrate how periods within the 20-year reflection bleed into, and heavily influence, each other.

In turn, periodization serves an analytical objective, but hides its artificiality. On the wider scale, the politics of the time, attitudes, and economy influence interventions (including peacekeeping, humanitarian, and development) and their development. At the same time, past behaviour influences the current behaviour of political elites, individuals, and groups, but so do perceptions of the future. Thus, the legacy of Saddam's regime, of the invasion period, the first government formation, the civil war, the US withdrawal, the rise of the Islamic State, and so on, influences how groups interact, while the interactions between political elites and with the international community in each of the periods influences behaviour of Iraqi political actors and the population at large (Palani and Fazil, this issue; Alshamary and Hadad, 2003).

¹⁹Read and Mac Ginty, "The Temporal Dimension in Accounts of Violent Conflict," 151.

The invasion and occupation of Iraq had a great impact on the population, but just as this impact differed across time, so too did it differ across space. This connects to the impact on the standing of the political community that represents Iraqis across the country, the geopolitical position of regions, and the physical engagement (or lack thereof) of international actors. 'Society is fundamentally spatial in the sense that everyday life, protests, violence, war, and peace all play out in space ... therefore that what exists in space will affect how society plays out'.²⁰ In this regard the invasion, occupation and the peacebuilding and development that followed it, had a significant impact on shaping the spaces it occupied and interacted with. In divided societies, identities often merge with territory,²¹ so what we see in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and the South of Iraq differs greatly, as illustrated in the articles by Palani & Fazil and Alshamary & Hadad. There is also a very specific NGO place that operates within, yet separate to, Iraq and where local realities are reflected differently, or to fit within international perceptions. As a result, terms such as the local, can often be very separate to the actual local actors, as Parry and Vogel (this issue) so aptly demonstrates. Thus, there has been a privileging of space by international actors, which has had a deep impact on the dynamics within Iraq and has been enacted in different ways across space and time over the last 20 years as the contributions to this special issue demonstrate.

We cannot just examine space in its geographical context, 'on being inhabited, space is appropriated, given meaning and interpreted and thus transformed into place'.²² As space becomes place the impact and actions are felt differently in the political sphere (Palani and Fazil, this issue), the security sphere (Costantini and O'Driscoll, this issue), the non-governmental organization sphere (Parry and Vogel, this issue), and across the country (Alshamary and Hadad, this issue). In this regard, we see significant differences in how the invasion, occupation, and resulting peacebuilding, state-building and development interventions are felt across the country. As we analyse how space becomes place, different dynamics emerge: within the KRI the two main political parties' control over territory in Erbil and Duhok can be differentiated from Sulaymaniyah and Halabja (politically, culturally, and so on), and the pre-invasion, invasion, and policies of international actors all play a role in this difference (Palani and Fazil, this issue). Whereas, in the south, local dynamics and needs have been neglected, and taken for granted, by local, national, and international actors, despite Shi'a Arab privilege at the national level due to their majority (Alshamary and

²⁰Gusic, "The Relational Spatiality of the Postwar Condition," 49.

²¹Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel, *Spatialising Peace and Conflict*; Gusic, "The Relational Spatiality of the Postwar Condition."

²²Björkdahl and Kappler, *Peacebuilding and Spatial Transformation*, 2.

Hadad, this issue). In both contexts, while the political elite have benefitted from the interventions, the population that lacks solid connections to this elite have not.

Concluding Remarks

Although the US-led military invasion phase ended formally in 2003 the resulting peacebuilding, statebuilding, development and stabilization interventions have continued to this day and have had a significant impact on the country. As the articles in this special issue demonstrate rather than having a set plan for intervention, Iraq became a laboratory for testing policies, the impact of which are still seen today. Within the wider intervention framework, Iraq has not only been influenced by international dynamics, it also influenced international dynamics – and here the concept of failure and the resulting adaptive policies are key. Despite the vast amount of money spent in and on Iraq, development issues remain, which are best articulated by the Tishreen protest movement. The securitization of development provides one reasoning for this failure, as does the centring of the interveners and political elites' needs, rather than that of the population.

The invasion and occupation of Iraq went beyond regime change and heavily interfered in domestic affairs in the name of liberal statebuilding. Based on principles of liberal intervention the aim in Iraq was to reform the system of governance – based on Western understandings thereof – however, the results have been found wanting. The strong focus on elites has all but ignored local needs and has created a system for the elites rather than the people.²³ Resultingly, many of the same issues that faced Iraq following the intervention still face the country today. These issues remain, despite the extent of engagement, including finances, range of international actors and twenty years of engagement. It is thus not surprising that Iraq (along with Afghanistan) marks the beginning of the end of liberal peace/statebuilding as a solution in conflict-affected contexts. In turn, the twenty-year perspective provided in this special issue illustrates the demise of liberal statebuilding, its adaptation and readaptation, and the current state of the intervention discourse, which claims to, yet fails to, take into account local needs. Collectively, this Special Issue reaffirms the centrality of the 2003 intervention logic, which 20 years after, still haunts Iraq and whose legacy still proves prolific and conducive to understanding, interpreting, and explaining the reality on the ground as well as the evolution of international interventionism.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

²³Khedir, "Not to Mislead Peace."

Funding

Gerda Henkel Foundation: AZ 01/KF/20.

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