4-11-2023

20 Years After the Iraq War: Stories and Perspectives

Alissa Walter
Seattle Pacific University, waltera@spu.edu

Alissa Walter, PhD

"20 Years after the Iraq War: Stories and Perspectives"
Weter Lecture 2023

Good evening. It's wonderful to see you all here: my family, my colleagues, my students, and members of the broader SPU community. Thank you for this warm welcome and introduction from President Menjares and Caroline Maurer from the Faculty Life Office. Thanks to the members of the Faculty Development Committee who selected my proposal last year and made this opportunity possible.

This Spring marks the 20th anniversary of the US invasion of Iraq. The invasion began on March 19th, 2003, and on April 9th – a date we passed just 2 days ago – US forces entered the Iraqi city of Baghdad and toppled Saddam Hussein's regime. The entire Iraqi state collapsed with it.

Anniversaries can be a helpful invitation to reflect on the past.

As a Christian, for me this anniversary invites spiritual reflection, as well. As a Christian who is a professional historian, I have been guided in my research by God's calling to love. To love fully and widely. To love our neighbors, and to love our enemies, and in fact, because of our higher calling to love, to do away with these divisions and categories altogether.

I have always felt strongly that in being called to love others, we must necessarily be called to be curious about others and their stories. How can we love someone well without knowing them, without wanting to know them, or to know their experiences? And through sharing our stories, it's possible to stand together in empathetic relationship. As a Christian historian, I study history to more fully love and know others. I invite us all to step into this posture of loving curiosity and empathy tonight.

I am a researcher of Iraq, but I am not an Iraqi. The stories I will be drawing your attention to tonight come from oral history interviews I've conducted in Iraq, from memoirs and diaries of Iraqis, and from historical archives. I share these stories with the utmost care, and love, and humility, and respect. To the Iraqis in the room who have joined us today – welcome, I'm so glad you're here. I hope that my research reflects accurately the history and experiences of Iraq over the past few decades.

At the end of today's talk, I'll provide a QR code with different resources pointing to works by Iraqis: podcasts, memoirs, scholarship, and fiction that are accessible in English for those interested in learning more and in hearing directly from Iraqis themselves.

So let us return now to the anniversary at hand.

Undoubtedly, you've seen articles and posts talking about the 20th anniversary of the Iraq War, much of which, in the US, at least, has focused on decisions by the Bush Administration.

But if we start our reflections with the moment of the US invasion in 2003, if we start the story there, it can distort our understanding, running the risk of both under-estimating the role of the US in Iraq's history, and also, somehow, the risk of over-estimating the US role.

Here's what I mean. if we start our reflections on Iraq with the US invasion in 2003, we risk under-estimating the impact and involvement of US foreign policy in Iraq since that really began much earlier. From the perspective of many Iraqis, the US war against Iraq didn't start in 2003. It started in 1990 and lasted continuously until 2011, when the US withdrew most of its troops.

What the US public sometimes skips over is that between the Gulf War of 1990/91 and the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 was a 13-year period of severe economic sanctions on Iraq, led by the US, and accompanied by occasional US bombings of the country. So if we don't talk about the Gulf War or the years of US-backed sanctions in the 1990s we miss the true extent of the legacies of US actions that continue to be felt in Iraq today.

On the other hand, if we only talk about the impact of US foreign policy and keep a narrow focus just on US actions, we run the risk of marginalizing Iraqis from their own history, making the US a starring character in someone else's story. There's a fine balance to strike. My goal today is to keep the focus on Iraqis: how they perceived and experienced different challenges in recent decades, whether those challenges were caused by US actions or from internal dynamics within Iraq.

So today, I'm not going to focus just on the 2003 War. Because I want to help shed light on the other side of the story—on the experiences of Iraqis. Because the kinds of challenges that Iraqis have faced in recent decades have been existential: genocide. Civil war. Authoritarian rulers and their secret police. Foreign wars and occupation by foreign armies. Economic collapse. State collapse. And yet, Iraqis are still here, resilient. And the young generation of Iraqis is fighting for a better future.

By walking through Iraq's recent history, from Saddam to the present, I want to shed light on the strategies that Iraqis have used to weather these severe threats to their very existence. How individuals and communities have navigated their relationships with each other, and with the government, to survive, and possibly even thrive, during three challenging periods: dictatorship under Saddam, the Gulf War and economic sanctions of the 1990s, and the US invasion of 2003 and all the chain reactions that came with it. Along the way, we will account for the impact and legacies US policies on the lives of Iraqis. And from this, my hope is that we leave here today with a clearer appreciation for the kinds of forces that can divide, or unite, communities that are facing extreme challenges.

A final caveat is that my research for the past 10 years has focused on the city of Baghdad in an urban history approach. Most of my analysis here tonight has this Baghdad-centered perspective. Those who know Iraq know that history looks very different if told from the perspective of the Kurdish North, for example. So this, tonight, is not the last word, and there are many more stories and perspectives from Iraqis I hope you'll seek out. But this is the reason why you'll hear so much about Baghdad specifically in tonight's talk.

With that, let's begin.

In the History Department at SPU, we talk a lot about ways to disrupt stereotypes and move away from what Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie calls the "danger of a single story." Many people outside of Iraq have only a single story about this country – that of Iraq as a warzone.

So it's important to me that we start our history today in 1950, when Iraq was experiencing a renaissance. From 1950-1980 Iraq was a rising star and a regional leader within the Middle East. They were the envy of many for their high-quality schools and health care systems. Iraqi Poets, artists, sculptors, musicians, intellectuals have always been the soul and center of Iraqi culture, and new art exhibits and were showcased in these decades in particular.

This prosperity and development was funded by oil. Iraq has the 4th largest oil reserves in the world. For a period of 30 years, from 1950 to 1980, oil fueled the years of plenty: cinemas, night clubs, chic hotels cropped up along the Tigris river in Baghdad. The population boomed. American architect Frank Lloyd Wright was even commissioned to build an opera house in Baghdad based on the Garden of Eden. Had things gone differently, Iraq might look like Dubai today. Its future looked prosperous.

In fact, an Iraqi friend just texted me yesterday a video that's been circulating on Youtube; it's an old family film showing scenes of Baghdad in the 1970s. "It's heartbreaking," she texted me, "to see how Baghdad was the most advanced and prosperous city in the region" and then to compare it to the present day.

So what changed? In 1968, the Bath Party came to power in Iraq through a coup. Saddam Hussein became the Vice President and a power behind the throne during these years. The Ba'th party was thin on ideology: secular, vaguely socialist, but all of these principles turned out to be negotiable. Later, Saddam swapped out socialism for market economics and substituted secularism for a state-promoted faith campaign when conditions called for it. Saddam Hussein sought power for the sake of power.

In 1979, Saddam officially became president of Iraq. He liked citizens to refer to him in increasingly obsequious terms:

السيد الرئيس القائد المجاهد البطل صدام حسين حفظه الله و رعاه

Mr. President, the "warrior hero," though, "Father of all Iraqis" would also do. He built up an extensive cult of personality around himself. His face: whether on postage stamps, gold watches, murals, or public sculptures, appeared everywhere.

Iran-Iraq War

The years of plenty and prosperity for many Iraqis came to an end in 1980, when Saddam, as the new president of Iraq, led the country in an 8-year war against their neighbor, Iran. This turned out to be a fateful decision that changed the entire trajectory of the country, setting off a chain reaction of events that leads to today.

The cause of the war was that in 1979, the neighboring country of Iran had a religious revolution that propelled the Shi'ite cleric Ayatollah Khomeini into power. Saddam received US support to stop the spread of the Iranian revolution and to try to unseat the new regime there. (Ironically, of course, Donald Rumsfeld would later serve as the Secretary of Defense leading the war against Saddam in 2003). Saddam also received large loans from Gulf countries like Kuwait to fight against Iran.

This war against Iran solidified Saddam's rule over the country, but devastated the population: there were 1 million casualties from this war in a country with a population of only 17 million at the time.

The Iran-Iraq war saw the use, on both sides, of child soldiers, land mines, and trench warfare. Conscripted soldiers were sent on never-ending tours of duty, postponing their lives for nearly a decade. During these years, women were female-headed households, they went to work to support the war effort, and then were told to bear more sons to make up for the lost lives of this generation of young men.

Critics of the war and critics of Saddam, especially Iraqi Shi'ites with sympathy for Iran's new religious government, formed underground opposition movements to Saddam's rule. Many were tortured and executed by the regime's secret police, and others sought safety in exile. After 2003, these underground Shi'ite opposition groups would come back from exile and become the new rulers of Iraq.

There were other Iraqis persecuted during the war, too. Under the cover of war, Saddam ordered a genocide against Iraq's Kurdish population in the North, who he accused of treasonously collaborating with Iran in an effort to break off and form their own country. This genocide against Iraqi Kurds murdered 50,000 to 100,000 people, killed with poison gas or executed in mass graves. The US would later point to this genocide and the use of chemical weapons against the Kurds as justifications for the 2003 US invasion.

As I said, Iraqis have faced many existential threats in the past decades: war, genocide, a ruthless dictator. Unfortunately, things would get worse for most of the country.

After the War with Iran ended in 1988, Iraqi citizens were so eager to restart their lives: eager to marry, to spend time with their families, to start their careers in earnest. Saddam was also eager to kickstart the country economically after the war. There was a lot of optimism and new development projects that began in 1989. And had that continued, history would look very different.

One woman I interviewed, a lawyer and community leader, recalled that 1988 and 1989 were precious years. She and other Iraqis wanted to move forward past the grief and loss of the war. But as she said, this lasted for only 2 years before Iraq entered another war. Oil prices were low in 1989 and 1990, and that was hurting Iraq's economic recovery.

Gulf War

Saddam wanted a quick fix for the economy. In 1990, Saddam decided to invade their southern neighbor, Kuwait: a small, oil-rich country. Though Kuwait had supported Iraq in its war against Iran, Kuwait refused to forgive the millions of dollars of loans they had given. Saddam decided that Invading and annexing Kuwait would solve Iraq's financial problems: canceling their debt and giving them access to Kuwait's immense oil reserves.

This decision to invade Kuwait was the decision that set the US and Iraq on a collision course for the next 20 years. Iraq occupied Kuwait from August 1990 until February 1991. The Iraqi occupation of Kuwait was brutal for civilians living inside Kuwait at that time. That's another topic I've researched and it can't be understated.

But when we read through diaries of Iraqi soldiers that were left behind on the battlefield and preserved in archives, the picture that emerges is that many Conscripted Iraqi soldiers in Kuwait were exhausted and demoralized. They didn't want to be there. Some conscripted soldiers had already served for years against Iran. As one soldier poetically expressed in his diary, all his plans for

the future disappeared, and his life was now like a "black cloth." Many soldiers began to desert the army, going on leave and never returning.

In January 1991, the US and its allies moved to the offensive stage of the war known as Desert Storm. For six weeks, the US and its allies rained down bombs on Iraqi military positions in Kuwait, but also, crucially, on civilians living in the capital city of Baghdad.

Bombing Baghdad was meant to pressure Saddam to surrender and withdraw the troops from Kuwait. Baghdadis who lived through these 6 long weeks of bombardments, like the sculptor Nuha al-Radi, were bitter towards both the West and Saddam that they suffered the brunt of this punishment. She wrote in her diary in 1991, for 40 days they had been surviving US bombardments for a war that was never their idea to begin with. While Iraqi civilians were facing death each day, Saddam was safe in secured bunkers.

US bombs targeted civilian infrastructure in Baghdad: power stations, bridges, runways, hospitals, and water treatment plants. The damage was estimated at $232 billion dollars. One survey by the UN concluded that during the time of the 1991 bombings, Baghdad had "no public electricity, no telephones, no gasoline for civilian vehicles, and only 5% of its normal water supply."

You can see the human toll of this in Diaries of Baghdadis, such as in the memoirs of Iraqi journalist Ghaith Abdul-Ahad. He wonders if life in Iraq will ever be the same? The answer, truthfully, is no. These systems of electricity, sewage, and water that daily life depends on never fully recovered, even to today.

Sanctions

The lasting damage, the lasting consequences of the Gulf War were far than these few weeks of bombings. The reason for this is that the UN, with the strong backing of the US, imposed a severe economic embargo on the country starting in 1990. The purpose was to pressure Saddam to leave Kuwait. After the war, sanctions were meant to turn Iraqis against Saddam, weakening him. They were also meant to ensure he couldn't resume production of weapons of mass destruction, like the poison gas he used against the Kurds and in the Iran-Iraq War. These sanctions remained in place for 13 years, and were lifted only with the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.

In their earliest form, these economic sanctions on Iraq were a complete economic blockade: nothing goes in, nothing comes out. Meaning: Iraq could not sell or export any oil, which made up nearly the entire national income. Even if Iraq had revenue to buy goods with, nothing was allowed to come in. There were supposed to be exceptions made for food and medicine, but every shipment had to be reviewed and approved by a committee at the UN to make sure it didn't violate the terms of the sanctions, so in practice, there were severe shortages and difficulties getting medicine into the country.

The work of rebuilding Baghdad was made almost impossible by the rules of the sanctions. Importing things like cement and rebar were forbidden because they were items that could have possible military applications. To this day, Baghdad's infrastructure is failing, stemming back from this moment in 1991 and the impact of sanctions that followed. As stated in a recent interview with one man in Baghdad, since the bombings of 1991 that took out electrical grids, and other infrastructure, there has never been a quality, systematic rebuilding from the time of Saddam until now.

How did Iraqis experience sanctions? What was life like for them?

I said that Iraq used to have an educational system and healthcare system that was the envy of many in the region in the 1960s and 1970s. All of that vanished because of sanctions. The value of the Iraqi currency collapsed in the 1990s because of the embargo, so Middle class professionals — doctors, teachers, pharmacists, lawyers – their public sector salaries devalued to an average of $3 a month, and no, that didn't buy you anything. Many stopped going to work, or fled abroad, hollowing out the country of some of the most skilled and talented professionals.

The artist Nuha al-Radi tells a story in her diary from the sanctions period about a friend of hers that went to a hospital for a routine surgery. When he arrived, he found no sheets, no heat, no lightbulbs, and frequently, not even enough medicine for what they needed. Anyone with cancer needed to leave the country for treatments.

Starvation would have been a real threat at this time, had it not been for government food rations that began to be distributed during the sanctions era. One man I interviewed told me that his monthly salary lasted for about 2 days, and then he had to rely on government food rations to survive the rest of the month. Milk and animal protein became luxury goods available only to the upper classes.

One former school teacher was interviewed by a researcher in the 1990s, and she told this story: her husband was killed in the Iran-Iraq War, so she was raising her child by herself. She survived solely on the food rations provided by the government, and was often without any fuel for lighting or for heat. Remember, the damage to the electrical grid. She and her child often went hungry at the end of each month. Sanctions were so restrictive and so all-encompassing that they formed a kind of collective punishment.

This is what I meant when I said that the American public sometimes *underestimates* the impact of the US on the lives of Iraqis by not taking a full account of the impact of Gulf War bombings and the 13 years of sanctions that followed.

So how did people survive this triple threat of Gulf War bombings, sanctions, and dictatorship? How did they navigate the challenges the 1990s?

Some Iraqis responded by rebellion and uprisings. In 1991, as Iraqi soldiers were retreating from Kuwait, mass uprisings swept across the country: protesting the war, protesting Saddam—people were fed up. In the Kurdish north, which had just survived a genocide, these uprisings were especially fierce as the population fought against a regime that had sought to wipe them out. Kurdish rebels succeeded in breaking apart from the country, forming a semi-autonomous region of Iraq that remains under a regional self-government to this day.

Iraqis in the southern part of the country rose up as well, but Saddam was able to crush these rebellions ruthlessly, turning helicopter gunships on the crowds. As one woman I interviewed mentioned, people simply disappeared in 1991 and were not heard from again, whether they had fled abroad or been captured or killed because of their participation. No one could talk about it because of fear of the regime.

More quietly, groups of exiles and underground opposition groups continued to plot against Saddam. One particularly influential, small group of exiles called themselves the Iraqi National Congress, and they began to hold meetings in the 1990s with US foreign policy officials, paving the way for the Iraq War years before 9/11.

Inside Iraq, people found ways to push back and show their dissatisfaction. Soldiers continued to desert from compulsory military duty in large numbers. Deserters risked severe punishments, including bodily amputations, for doing so. Nevertheless, desertions continued. People resorted to black markets, smuggling, and theft to stay afloat financially.

The problem was that the very decisions to help you survive economically – like selling goods on the black market -- were the very things that could get you arrested and tortured by security forces. And so the safest route for many was to actually lean towards the regime to survive, whether you liked Saddam or not. Making sure your family was in good standing with the government could help keep you safe, help you get access to more food and financing.

Some People wrote letters to Saddam asking for food, medicine, money, housing. In this petition from the archives, a young woman wrote to Saddam, flattering him as the "father of all Iraqis," in the hope of receiving financial assistance for her family.

In another survival strategy: some volunteered to be informants. If you volunteered information to the regime by ratting on your neighbors, or even family members, it could help ensure you're your good standing, possibly extra access to food, promotions, or college placement.The problem was that in this environment, no one knew who they could trust: if their coworker, friend, or cousin might inform on them. People became increasingly isolated and distrustful.

So even though sanctions were meant to weaken Saddam, they had the opposite effect: many turned to the regime because they were providing food rations, they had the only resources in the country. It was a way to survive in the midst of economic collapse brought on by US-backed sanctions.

2003 War

So this was the situation Iraqis were living through on the eve of the 2003 war: devastated economically because of sanctions, living in paranoia about informants and the secret police, failed by their schools and their health care systems, grieving those lost in war or those disappeared by the regime.

So it isn't a total surprise that at least some Iraqis expressed a cautious optimism about what the US invasion would bring, that the US could remove a dictator and perhaps usher in a new period of freedom and prosperity: a dignified future long dreamed of and denied since 1980.

Of course, still many more Iraqis strongly resented the idea of any foreign army occupying their country, no matter what they thought of Saddam. One friend of mine, a wonderful Iraqi woman who was hosting me in her home in Baghdad, told me how she cried when she saw US tanks rolling into her city, what it felt like to be occupied.

As Iraqis have remembered the 20th anniversary of their occupation, stories that have been circulating on twitter focus on the terror and humiliation they felt having their houses searched by foreign soldiers. Even in the best case scenario, when every correct military protocol was followed,

foreign soldiers banging on your door in the middle of the night will fill anyone with dread. One colleague told me how her house was searched 5 times in the span of a few years, terrified each time they would take her brother, the only family member she had left in the country. Another colleague, a teenager at the time, was detained for 9 days by U.S. forces.

And this isn't even to mention Americans' use of torture in Abu Ghraib prison. To fully understand the impact of the US invasion on the lives of Iraqis, I encourage you all to read accounts by survivors of US torture. I'll include a link at the end. It's a bitter thing, to be occupied by a foreign army.

Consequences of the 2003 War

There are 3 consequences of the US invasion of Iraq that I want to highlight for you, shining a light on how the lives of Iraqis were impacted by the war and the changes it unleashed.

The first: corruption.

After Saddam was toppled, the US embarked on a process they called "reconstruction," promising to rebuild the country and also to introduce new, more democratic and more market-oriented political and economic systems. Unfortunately, the reconstruction was a failure, a conclusion reached by the US government's own internal auditor.

Problems stemmed from the practice of the US flying in literal planefulls of cash in a security environment where there were armed groups competing for power and a political system in flux. In interviews I did with U.S. military officers, they would tell me how, for example, they would be tasked with helping to build a school. The local armed group would demand that you give the contract to their friend or family member, or they would create problems for you. The contract was over paid, inflated as much as 10 times above the actual cost, the work was under-delivered, if it happened at all. Bribes were demanded to keep the work continuing. Every transaction was in cash, and billions were lost this way.

If we look at the amount of Iraqi public money that has been lost to fraud, we're talking about more than $150 billion of Iraqi public money lost to fraud and embezzlement since 2003. Just a few months ago, top officials embezzled $2.5 billion dollars from the Tax office and fled the country. Meanwhile, the electrical grid still doesn't work, health care systems are still failing,: all in a country with one of the largest oil reserves in the world. They should have the best.

If we look at the impact of corruption on the lives of Iraqi citizens, it looks like this: The average Iraqi adult pays 4 bribes per year. These are bribes for routine government functions like: getting a pot hole or broken sewer line fixed in your street. Applying for college. Applying for a job.
One man said in a recent interview that bribes are simply out in the open now, the way things get done. One study found that Iraqi college graduates are paying up to $10,000 in bribes to get hired. *If* the job actually materializes, and they didn't just scam you for your money, you can expect to pay a portion off your paycheck going forward. It's no surprise that Youth unemployment is at 36%. And the problem has been getting worse, not better, as bribes have become engrained as the way of doing business.

The second major consequence of the 2003 US invasion is sectarianism. Let me explain what that means. From 2003-2004, after the overthrow of Saddam, there was no Iraqi government for a

period of time. The US ruled Iraq, we governed it through an office called the Coalition Provisional Authority, or CPA, led by US ambassador Paul Bremer. The CPA, this US government in Iraq, created an advisory council, called the Governing Council, of Iraqis that was meant to help prepare the way for the transition to an eventual new sovereign Iraqi government.

This advisory council was populated entirely by Iraqi exiles who had fled abroad due to their opposition to Saddam. Most were religious Shi'ite opposition groups who had fled to Iran or the West during the Iran-Iraq War. Some were Kurds. A few were secular intellectuals. Now that Saddam was gone, this eclectic group of exiles returned to the country after years away, working closely with the US government to inherit power.

Amongst themselves, this diverse bunch of Iraqi exiles decided that the most fair way to govern would be to share power amongst themselves. They proportionally allocated seats on the council based on ethnicity and religion. The largest demographic group in Iraq are Arab Shi'ites, so they got the most seats. Arab Sunnis, Kurds, Christians, and other minority groups got smaller allocations based on their population sizes. The idea behind this was to make sure everyone was represented in the new, post-Saddam government, which is certainly a worthy goal.

However, power sharing by identity quotas had the perverse effect of sidelining the actual work of politics. Platforms, policies, programs – people weren't elected for their ideas anymore, just for who they were, and which community they represented.

When the new sovereign Iraqi government was formed in 2004, this was the quota system it was based on, and the US supported it. The Iraqi state got divided like a pie, and the state turned into turf. Arab Shi'ite political parties were given full control of half of all government ministries, like the Ministries of oil, as the largest demographic. The Prime Minister also has to be an Arab Shi'ite and can never be anyone but an Arab Shi'ite, no matter how effective a leader a Kurd or Sunni or Christian might be. And so it's divisive. Rather than unifying diverse communities of Iraq into a collaborative political environment under an over-arching platform of ideas, this system divided groups against each other as rivals.

Add to this in the major issue of corruption, where government ministers simply plunder their treasuries for personal enrichment, and you see the problem. The point of gaining control of a government ministry wasn't to actually govern, to actually use the Ministry of Health, say, to provide quality health services to the whole population. Instead, the Ministry of Health was given to a Shi'ite political party who used ministry jobs to hire Shi'ite party supporters, to embezzle money to benefit Shi'ite militias and to set up fraudulent contracts to Shi'ite businessmen. And it's not just Shi'ites, it every political party in the system.

This is why the health care system is still failing, why there still is not 24 hours of electricity: it's the combined effects of corruption and sectarianism in the aftermath of sanctions and bombings. This sectarian system did not exist before the US invasion in 2003.

What started in politics soon spilled out to the streets. This brings me to my third and final point about the legacies of the US War for the lives of Iraqis: the consequences of violence.

In 2003 and 2004, an anti-US insurgency grew out of resentment for the presence of foreign troops. In the increasingly violent atmosphere, militias formed to represent and protect the interests of each sectarian or religious community.

I should add that sectarian identity wasn't that important to most Iraqis before 2003. Sunnis and Shi'ite intermarried before 2003, as unremarkable as a Protestant marrying a Catholic in the US. It was the political quota system that suddenly made sectarian identity relevant. So in the power vacuum following the US invasion, Shi'ite militias soon arose. Sunni extremist groups joined the scene.

There were also a few notable bad actors, foreign extremists who crossed the borders into Iraq in the lawlessness that followed the US invasion. Some came with the express intention of waging a sectarian war, and they greatly worsened the problem. One example is the Jordanian extremist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who founded the organization that became ISIS.

There simply isn't a way to adequately convey the heartache and terror and devastation of these years of sectarian violence and civil war on the lives of Iraqis. A friend of mine who witnessed the murder of a shopkeeper in his street. A colleague who was kidnapped and held for ransom. Colleagues whose co-workers starting disappearing, their bodies sometimes found in the streets nearby. Bullet holes are still painfully visible in central parts of Baghdad. These are the stories you need to hear directly from Iraqis themselves, from those who lived through it: of the terror people experienced simply trying to go to school, or to the market for groceries.

During the years of peak violence, from 2005-2008, There were only two ways to survive at that time: you either had to seek protection with your ethnic and sectarian group, moving to a homogenous area that had been "cleansed," or you had to leave. Millions of innocent civilians fled as sectarian militias and death squads tried to cleanse communities of the diversity Iraq is known for. Around 300,000 Iraqi civilians died since 2003 from war and armed conflict. Currently, there are 9.2 million Iraqis who are displaced inside the country or around the world as refugees.

Corruption, violence, no functioning state, no services, loved ones lost, fleeing for your lives: it's no wonder why many Iraqis today rate life before 2003 as better than after 2003. There's actually a growing nostalgia amongst young Iraqis for life under Saddam, where terror and violence were at least predictable, and state services worked. One interviewee stated: "Before 2003, people lived in despair, fear, and terror. After 2003, people were looking forward to something good. But we are shocked that there has been nothing good to mention. […] The situation became worse than it was before 2003." Another put it more bluntly: "To be honest, things were bad before 2003. And then after 2003, they got even worse."

As I mentioned, one of the extremist organizations that formed *after* 2003 was called Tawhid wa al-Jihad, they later renamed themselves ISIS. ISIS didn't exist in Iraq before 2003; its creation was made possible by the changes unleashed with the US war. ISIS waged war on Iraq's Shi'ites. They also attempted genocide Iraq's Christians and another religious group called the Yazidis.

I happened to meet with some Iraqi Christian families in the Kurdish northern region of Iraq in 2016, during the first week of the months-long battle to defeat ISIS-held territory. These families I spoke with were originally from Baghdad. After 2003, to escape sectarian militias, these families then moved to Ninewa province – that's Ninevah, where the prophet Jonah is buried. Ninevah is home

to Christian communities that are some of the oldest Christian communities in the world. Christians in Iraq speak Assyrian and neo-Aramaic as their first languages, living languages in these communities. They had just started to rebuild their lives when ISIS attacked, uprooting them for a second time.

Today, Qaraqosh has been rebuilt. But Christian survivors of ISIS genocides wonder if there's a future for them in the new Iraq. There were as many as 1.4 million Christians in Iraq before 2003, one of the largest Christian communities in the Middle East. Today, the number of Christians in Iraq has fallen by about 80% since 2003. There are fewer than 250,000 Christians in Iraq today. Those of us in the room who consider ourselves American Christians in particular need to grapple with this legacy of the US war--the devastation of Iraq's Christian communities--and look for more ways to be good neighbors in solidarity with them.

Iraq Today

So where are things at today? What can we learn, and Where can we see hope for the future?

Today, there is a new sense of calm and security in Iraq, compared to what most of the past 2 decades was like. I visited Baghdad twice in the last year, enjoying nightlife at new restaurants along the Tigris river, visiting colleagues, staying with friends, no security detail. There are even European backpackers and a couch surfing community popping up in Iraq. Iraqis I interviewed tell me that they're glad they have freedom of expression in Iraq now. Failing infrastructure can ultimately be fixed, but freedom from authoritarian rule is rare in the Middle East.

However, there are very few positive legacies to point to when looking at the role of US foreign policy on the lives of Iraqis from 1990 to the present. The impact of sanctions and the changes brought by the 2003 invasion continue to be devastating. Iraqis have had to adapt to the challenges they've experienced. Pre-2003, Survival methods was individualistic because people couldn't work collectively: the regime interpreted any collective action as a threat. After 2003, survival strategies became communal: one's own ethnic group or religious sect. This again comes back to the political structures: communal identity is the only kind of identity that's recognized in the system.

But that may be changing. Not because of top-down forces, this time, but from the grassroots below. In 2019, thousands and thousands of young people, people born after 2003, who have only known the violence and corruption of the new state, took to the street for months-long protests. In the South, in the North, and in Baghdad, people occupied main squares for months. These protests weren't against one particular leader, or one particular policy. It was against the entire political system: the way that these ethnic and religious quotas allowed corrupt political parties to sit back and simply plunder the state. The chants of the protesters was: "Nureed Watan" – "We want a country." We want to be Iraqis. No Sunnis, no Shi'ites, but all Iraqis, with a government that works, that functions, and it functions for all Iraqis.

The protests ended in early 2020: hundreds of protesters were killed by security forces, and then Covid came next. There is a long, hard path ahead of Iraq will achieve that kind of national unity. But this is the hope being expressed by the next generation: that political structures will change so that Iraqis can survive, and thrive, in the future - not individuals, not as divided religious and ethnic communities, but as a country.

Thank you.