

Analyzing the Motives of US Foreign Policy in Iraq

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ABSTRACT: Twenty years have passed since the US occupation of Iraq, yet the deployment of the US military in the Middle Eastern country remains today. Initially, the US argued that the primary aim for invasion was the disarmament of the mass weapons (WMD). Further on, they claimed that the intervention was to help establish the Iraq democracy. The final justification for the troops to stay was to combat ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). This raises the question, what are the true motives of the US foreign policy in Iraq? This research was conducted using a qualitative method by analyzing textual data from the previous studies, official documents, and media reports. The data are analyzed using foreign policy theory related to national interests. The findings of this study indicate that the main motive why the US military continue to exist in Iraq is to maintain its power and hegemony in the region. In line with that, the US also has economic motives, such as oil and arms business.

Keywords: Foreign Policy, National Interest, Power, Hegemony, US, Iraq



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INTRODUCTION

The year of 2023 marks the twenty years of the United States (US) invasion in Iraq. To date, the US troops remain in the region despite the Iraqi parliament's resolution to insist the government to expel US troops from the country ([Bouchet, 2022](#); [Ibrahim, 2020](#); [Jaganathan, 2019](#)). The US claimed that the settlement of the US troops in Iraq is the threat from ISIS. This was conveyed by the US Secretary of Defense, Lloyd Austin, who visited Baghdad in March 2023 and stated that the United States is committed to maintain its military presence in the country to combat ISIS ([Al Jazeera, 2023](#)).

The United States officially invaded Iraq on March 19, 2003, after President George W. Bush launched a pre-emptive war against Iraq to eliminate weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and international terrorism. It was when Bush announced, "*My fellow citizens, at this hour, American and coalition forces are in the early stages of military operations to disarm Iraq, to free its people, and to defend the world from grave danger.*" The attack on Iraq was carried out without a mandate from the UN Security Council. It was carried out by the US and Britain, along with 29 other countries joining a coalition

against Iraq known as the "Coalition of the Willing."

These countries support the invasion of Iraq since they believed the US officials' statement regarding the existence of mass weapons. In February 2003, then-US Secretary of State Colin Powell informed the UN Security Council (UNSC) that Iraq had a "mobile laboratory" for producing biological weapons. He demanded the UNSC to mandate an attack on Iraq. However, the UNSC decided to conduct further investigation. Without the consent from the UNSC, however, the US and its coalition continued to invade Iraq ([BBC, 2023](#)).

In the early summer of 2004, the US government acknowledged that the States had failed to find the location of the WMD allegedly belonged to Saddam Hussein and traced no credible evidence concerning the connection between Saddam Hussein's regime and the terrorist attacks on the US by Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda, thus the war lost public support ([Gilpin, 2005](#); [Hasan et al., 2021](#); [Mohammed, 2021](#)). This was reinforced by a statement from the Secretary of State, Powell that the evidence of the WMD "appears not to be... that solid" ([BBC, 2023](#)).

The proof that WMD never existed made the US alter its purpose for invasion by declaring that the US expected to uphold the Iraqi democracy and liberate the people from the tyranny of Saddam Hussein. Saddam was eventually overthrown and executed, and the election was held ([CFR, 2022](#)). In addition, the US has spent considerable amount of funds for democratization measures in Iraq, yet it was far beyond the target ([Mahfud & Rezasyah, 2023](#)). Subsequently, the US military remained in Iraq for eight years before being withdrawn in 2011, only to return to Iraq in 2014 to fight the new terrorist threat from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). US support played a significant role in combating the ISIS when it was defeated in 2017. Nevertheless, about 2,500 US troops remain in the country to provide training, advice, and support to local forces in a bid to counter terrorism ([Smith, 2022](#)). This raises a research question, why do the US military remain in Iraq? With the Iraqi civilian government is now running a system of democracy and the ISIS movement has been annihilated, what are the real motives of US foreign policy in Iraq?

A number of studies have discussed the US war in Iraq, one of which was conducted by ([Allawi & Al-Jazeera, 2023](#); [Bonds, 2013](#); [Lyll, 2022](#)) who argued that the US aggression against Iraq in 2003 was triggered by oil. Furthermore, an investigation conducted by ([Butt, 2019](#)) emphasized that the existence of WMD, the concerns for democracy, and domestic interests were the motives of the invasion. He put forward a "performative war" thesis to explain the Iraq war, which conducted an in-depth analysis of status, reputation, and hierarchy. ([Flibbert, 2013](#)) highlights the failure of the US mission in Iraq through some analyses such as the ongoing terrorism, the economic stagnation, and the civil war. He argued it was the external factor that caused violence and insecurity, not the internal matters such as ethnicity and sectarian divisions. Thus, this article focuses on investigating the motives of US foreign policy in Iraq by using the theory of classical realism by Morgenthau and Holsti.

METHOD

This is a research with qualitative method where in-depth studies of specific events, phenomena, regions, countries, or individuals were conducted, in order to understand the meanings and processes that shape international politics more thoroughly. Furthermore, the method was employed to understand, analyze, and explain the motives of US foreign policy in Iraq. The data were collected from literature sources, such as journal articles, official documents, books, and news from respected media. Qualitative research methods generally use inductive reasoning, which allows the researchers to produce theoretical propositions originating from empirical observations ([Lamont, 2015](#)).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

US Invasion in Iraq and Terrorism

The US invasion of Iraq which began in 2003 claimed in a death toll of around 4,500 US troops within the period of 10 years. Meanwhile, Iraqi civilian casualties were estimated around 110,000 to over one million of deaths. From the economic standpoint, the US experienced a huge loss in the war. As economists Joseph Stiglitz and Linda Blimes point out, the total US economic impact of the war would exceed three trillion dollars, especially if the US takes into account not only the cost of health care for the wounded soldiers, but also the cost of interest payments since most of the funds come from deficit spending ([Bonds, 2013](#)). In 2004, reports emerged that US troops had tortured and humiliated detainees at Abu Ghraib, a prison 20 miles west of Baghdad which held about 3,800 prisoners, and the photos depicting the torture has triggered a growing number of Iraqis joining the "jihadists" groups to fight the US and persecute internal parties, such as Shiites and ethnic Kurds, whom they accuse of collaborating with the US ([Johnson et al., 2016](#)).

In 2013, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was formed to establish a caliphate in two regions, namely Iraq and Syria. The forerunner of ISIS was Iraqi Al Qaeda (AQI) formed in 2002 and was led by Abu Mus'ab Al-Zarqawi. When the agenda for overthrowing the Syrian regime began in 2011, Al Qaida in Syria took up arms against the Syrian government. In 2013, the leader of Al-Qaeda, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, released a video in which he called for the Mujahideen for a "jihad" (a holy war) to establish an Islamic state. Two days after the video was released, the leader of the Islamic State of Iraq, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, declared the formation of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria ([Sulaeman, 2013](#)).

ISIS is an organization with a cross-border "jihad" terrorists. ISIS propaganda has attracted thousands of men and women from over 100 countries to come to Syria and Iraq to join the organization ([Ali, 2020](#)). ISIS is the development of Al Qaida, yet the ideology is more extreme than Al Qaida. ([Ali, 2020](#)) states that ISIS has adopted the most extreme and brutal version of the jihadi Salafi ideology. The basic ideology of ISIS is takfirism or disbelief by other parties, even though they are both Muslims. ISIS's priority is to "deal with the close enemy," that is, the enemy within the region's ruling regimes, institutions, and sects, and not its distant enemy (Western countries). The terrors from ISIS include the killing of the citizens of the countries, even fellow

Muslims, and the destruction targets for places of worship such as mosques and churches ([Ali, 2020](#)).

Furthermore, ISIS controls water sources, termed "weaponization of water." It was on August 7, 2014, when ISIS took control of the Mosul Dam, the water source for the city of Mosul. The occupation of water sources authorizes ISIS enormous power since water is the basic need of human being. It was reported that after the seizure of the dam, the US carried out several airstrikes to attack ISIS ([King, 2015](#)).

Theoretical Framework in Analyzing US Foreign Policy in Iraq

Foreign policy is a state scheme to deal with other countries or groups of countries. The policy is through an open and covert means and goals to carry out specific actions. The foreign policy combines national goals and interests by utilizing their power and capabilities. Thus, foreign policy is a country's tactics and strategy in conducting relations with other countries ([Jackson & Sørensen, 2009](#)). Furthermore, *foreign policy* can be interpreted as a state's pattern and behavior towards certain countries. The policy relates to the process of making decisions to determine a certain 'way' or method, and this can mean a policy of state and government leaders in the context of conducting relations with the world to achieve national goals ([Holsti, 1992](#)).

The analysis of foreign policy will depend on the paradigm used by the researcher. The authors use classical realism paradigm in this article, which international relations scholars widely use. According to realist thinkers, "the international system is an anarchic, self-help system, and international politics is a power struggle, and this struggle is inevitable and rational" ([Ates, 2022](#)). With this view, realist thinkers see that a country establishing foreign policy will generally prioritize power as a primary national interest. Power is considered very important because it is assumed that countries will try to survive in an anarchic international system. If a country is weak and powerless, it bears dangerous consequences, either being colonized or dominated by other countries.

Realist thinkers put forward the concept of a 'balance of power' in which states in the international system will always try to balance the power of other parties who become their enemies ([Ates, 2022](#)). The thinkers assume, if country A has certain amount of weapons, country B tries to outdo the former one through the possession of more weapons; conversely, when country A detects that B has more weapons, A raises its arms profile.

A realist perspective guides US foreign policy. The US has always been trying to achieve the most potent power in the international system. Nguyen 2013 (in ([Ates, 2022](#))) concludes that the US responds to international trends and threats to survive in the system. Due to the international system and policies, the US declares war or participates in alliances to balance other revisionist countries. In other words, US foreign policy is shaped by its relative power, external threats, and power struggles.

Using the theoretical framework above, the real motives of US foreign policy in Iraq will be analyzed. This remains an ongoing debate among thinkers. In 2023, Fisher writes that twenty years have passed, and the casualties are still falling. A total of 4,600 US troops have died, and hundreds of thousands (Fisher cites a figure of 300,000) Iraqis have been killed directly as the impact of war. Moreover, the US has lost around \$815 billion in the war. The result was

precisely the civil war in Iraq, the emergence of new movements of “jihadism” which turned to “punish” the US itself. Fisher asked, "Why did the United States invade Iraq?" ([Fisher, 2023](#)).

The research question formulated in this study is more specific, why the US persisted in Iraq when Saddam Hussein's regime has proven to have no WMD (the first reason for the US invasion), or when the democratic process was underway (the second reason for the US invasion) and even when ISIS had been declared lost (the reason the US came to Iraq again in 2014). What are actually the US foreign policy's motives in Iraq?

There are two conflicting opinions. First, the US motive is oil or second, the US motive is hegemony. Both questions are examined, and the most dominant motive is analyzed.

Oil as the Main Motive

It has been a long debate among realist thinkers regarding the primary motive of US foreign policy in the Middle East. The classic work of ([Bromley, 1998](#)) mentions that US policy in the oil-rich Middle East was aimed at confronting Iraq and Iran, maintaining authoritative regimes in the Arab Gulf, protecting US domestic and international oil interests, and continuing oil contracts. This is significant for the US oil and defense industries and the smooth supply of safe, less costly crude oil to US allies in Western Europe and the Pacific.

In 2003, a year after the US aggression in Iraq, the Brookings Institution, a very prominent think tank in the US stated that Iraq has a considerable oil reserves with low production costs. Furthermore, due to the isolation Iraq had to experience over the past decade, the technology in exploration such as seismological surveys, magnetometers, and sniffers has advanced rapidly. It was detected that no exploration to the deepest soil layers where large amounts of oil can be found has been conducted. Of the 74 fields discovered and evaluated, only 15 are operatable ([Brookings, 2003](#)).

Additionally, out of 526 potential drilling sites in Iraq, only 125 areas have been drilled. It can be concluded that 90 sites are potential as oil fields, but only 30 are partially developed. The figures indicate that with sophisticated exploratory tools, petrogeologists are able to construct a much more accurate picture of the scope of Iraq's reserves in a relatively short time than the US currently have ([Brookings, 2003](#)).

([Brookings, 2003](#)) mentions further that in the 2000 World Petroleum Assessment, the US Geological Survey (USGS) Department of the Interior presented figures based on extensive geological studies by a team of over 40 geologists who claimed that, in late 1995, Iraq has 100 bbl (barrel of crude oil) proven reserves of which 22 bbl have been found. Therefore, the USGS emphasized that Iraq's proven reserves are only 78 bbl—just two-thirds of the more commonly accepted DOE estimate of 112 bbl.

Profits from oil intertwines with other sectors, particularly the development projects that fall into the hands of large contractor companies, such as Bechtel, Parsons, and Halliburton. They enjoyed the huge gains from Iraq's reconstruction, whereas the US taxpayers fared even much worse since the state funds were used to finance the war in Iraq. As a consequence, the Iraq war has created a

kind of capitalist haven for most US and UK companies in the reconstruction of Iraq ([Chwastiak, 2013](#)).

Oil is not the Main Motive, Hegemony is

Some thinkers point out that oil has ceased to be the primary motive for US foreign policy in Iraq in the past decade as the US oil production has gained a surplus. First, the emergence of oil-ripping “hydraulic fracturing” has significantly reduced the US direct dependence on Gulf oil and reduced the strategic value and priority of US relations with Saudi Arabia and smaller Gulf Arab states. It is obvious that Gulf producers will continue to set up the world oil prices, the US companies will continue its stakes ownership in Gulf wells, and the United States will enjoy greater policy latitude and flexibility ([Simon & Stevenson, 2015](#)).

Others argue that the idea for the invasion in Iraq staged to profit from oil is inadequate. Stephen Zunes ([Zunes, 2014](#)) emphasized that Iraq's position among fellow OPEC members is relatively low, and in fact, Saddam Hussein had already sold his oil at a satisfactory price to the West under the UN-supervised Oil for Food program. In addition, the US oil companies support the stability of the Middle East region and strongly oppose the invasion. Should Bush seeks to pursue the agenda of US corporate capitalism, the cost of the invasion and the resulting economic damage will be disproportionate to the economic gains for the US regardless of the short-term benefits to Big Oil. This idea is also strengthened by reports from third parties who have access to decision-makers, namely ([Suskind, 2004](#)), ([Ricks, 2006](#)), ([Woodwar, 2002](#)), and several former Bush administration officials, such as (Feith, 2008) who makes little or no mention of oil as the cornerstone of this invasion.

For the above reasons, some thinkers state that the main motive of US foreign policy in Iraq is strengthening US hegemony in the Middle East. This is the reason why the US carried out the US invasion of Iraq (and then continued its occupation of Iraq on the pretext of the existence of ISIS). This argument is supported by Paul Wolfowitz, who denied the initial reason for the US attack on Iraq based on the destruction of WMD. Instead, he stated that President Bush portrayed this invasion as a vital struggle against evil and an attempt to reorganize the Middle East ([Wolfowitz, 2003](#)). In June 2003, Bush addressed Palestinian Prime Minister, Mahmoud Abbas, a religious motive for the US occupation, claiming that God commanded him to attack Saddam ([Regular, 2003](#)). ([Zunes, 2014](#)) wrote that Saddam Hussein was a figure who could carry out the success of the development in Iraq without the support from the superpower nations, through the utilization of rich oil resources, adequate water supply, and the ability to defend his foreign policy. He showed an anti-Western rhetoric and other actions that contrary to the US interests ([Zunes, 2014](#)).

The US intervention in Iraq and the assassination of Saddam Hussein were indeed an attempt to make Iraq submit to the will of the superpower. The impact of the US military occupation in Iraq is the destruction of the various facets of Iraqi's life, among others were sectarian conflicts, worsening ethnic divisions, the empowerment of “jihad” extremists, and the creation of new wars. The geopolitical sectarianization of the region is a process that began in earnest after the US invasion of Iraq ([Salloukh, 2013](#)).

([Altwaiji, 2014](#)) provides a common thread between oil and hegemony. He quotes the thinking of Noam Chomsky, who wrote that the invasion of Iraq had nothing to do with the retaliation for

the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Chomsky argued that for the US, hegemony is more important; the US is determined to establish its hegemony in Iraq by making the nation to be more amiable and continue to be America's "oil pumping station." Therefore, ensuring there is an adequate supply of oil is part of the US's strategies to establish its hegemony in the Middle East. The presence of US troops in Iraq is justified by the "democracy" and "human rights" jargon ([Altwaiji, 2014](#)).

Today, the US presence in Iraq follows the same patterns with those at the beginning of the 21st century. Apparently, the US come with its positive narratives that they expect to offer help to Iraq, to save the country from authoritative regimes, and to fight terrorism. Nevertheless, after combating ISIS, the US presence in Iraq is of no advantages for the country. Apparently, the US' plan for Iraq is vague and the creation of the post-conflict stabilization is impactless. Furthermore, the presence of the superpower is solely to serve their interests even though the US is said to have a crucial role in the success to war ISIS ([Cordesman, 2020](#)). Besides, Iraq has a vital role for the US in securing its control in the Middle East over oil flows, such as to combat terrorism, to prevent nuclear proliferation, and to protect both Israel and Jordan ([O'Hanlon & Allawi, 2020](#)).

From the views described, by reusing the realist perspective put forward by the thinkers, we can observe that the US try to gain greater power to defend its own various interests, since power is often regarded as the most important national interest. The US views that amid an anarchic international system, the nation should be strong and strive as a force to dominate others. With this framework, various strategies were set by the US, including waging a war without the United Nations' consent even if it causes a large number of casualties on the Iraqi side. Despite the US hegemony in Iraq, a considerable loss is intensifying. The state budget required for the war has been detrimental to the country's economy and benefited only a handful of elites.

CONCLUSIONS

This study analyzes the true motives of the US foreign policy in Iraq. It has been twenty years since the US military invaded Iraq, yet the superpower country prolonged its military occupation for a number of reasons. Initially, the primary aim was the disarmament of mass murder weapons, then the rationale shifted to a desire to help uphold the democracy in Iraq, and finally claimed that the motive was to fight ISIS in Iraq. Some realist thinkers argue that oil is the most significant factor for the US foreign policy of Iraq. Nevertheless, the authors believed that oil is a mere part of the driving factor, as the ultimate goal is to strengthen its hegemony in the Middle East region, even since the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Furthermore, controlling oil resources in Iraq is part of the policy in addition to gaining various economic interests such as arms business and reconstruction project, which benefited the US politics. As a consequence, the price for imposing such a foreign policy is a considerable loss for the Iraqi people, in which the economic difficulties, the terrorism attacks, and other various problems triggered by the US military in the early years of its invasion still exist today. Therefore, it is suggested that to maintain its hegemonic interest, partnering with Iraq in a non-exploitative measure by allowing Iraq to remain an independent country would be a better solution for the US. It can be concluded that hegemony with coercion will further fuel the rejection of the Iraqi people towards the US.

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