

Operation Iraqi Freedom and the New Iraq:

Insights and Forecasts

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Introduction

When Operation Iraqi Freedom commenced on March 19, 2003, it was not the beginning of a conflict but the final act of one that had lasted almost thirteen years. Since Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, the military containment of Iraq had become a familiar and unwelcome feature of the post-Cold War era. The September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States had brought the Middle East to the center of U.S. national security strategy, and now the invasion of Iraq saw the United States and its coalition allies project major armed forces to the very heart of the Middle East. Although every leading media outlet and many instant experts focused their attention on Iraq, The Washington Institute found that there remained a strong demand for analysis by long-term regional specialists that could go beyond the headlines.

Beginning in March 2003, Institute coverage of Iraq concentrated on providing a realistic and balanced interpretation of the rapidly changing present and venturing an informed view of the future. We focused on the serious issues of prewar intelligence and prisoner abuse within the context of evolving U.S. policy in the Middle East. Throughout, our objective was (and remains) to provide useful policy analysis to U.S. decisionmakers. Thus, the Institute's coverage focused primarily on the political, military, and economic challenges that the coalition confronted on a daily basis.

This book is a companion to the Institute's 1991 [GulfWatch Anthology \(templateC04.php?CID=170\)](#), which compiled seventy-eight analyses written by Institute scholars during and immediately after the Gulf crisis of 1990-1991. The seventy-seven texts collected here represent a selection of the Institute's most significant written work on Iraq, produced, with few exceptions, between March 19, 2003, and June 28, 2004, the date of Iraq's formal transition to self-governance.¹

This anthology serves two important purposes. First, for the reader's convenience, it draws together in one volume the Institute's prodigious work on Iraq from many sources, including The Washington Institute's flagship PolicyWatch series, authoritative defense publications such as Jane's Intelligence Review, scholarly journals such as

the Middle East Quarterly, and the opinion columns of major U.S. and European newspapers. Second, the anthology has added new value to the existing body of work through the introductory essays that begin each thematic part. These essays synthesize the key trends and developments evident in the political, military, and economic spheres. When gathered together and viewed as a continuous body of thought, the value of the products of the Institute's intensive coverage of Iraq is greatly increased.

For Institute scholars, the anthology offered an opportunity to step back from tracking new developments in Iraq and focus on the unanswered questions and unresolved issues of the invasion and occupation. Policy choices such as the contentious decision to disband the Iraqi military are placed in broader context. Expectations about the extent of Iraq's political transformation, the pace of security reform, and the country's ability to pay for its own economic reconstruction are critically assessed. Well-grounded judgments are rendered on issues of ongoing relevance, such as the significance of foreign fighters in the resistance and the roles played in Iraq by neighboring states such as Iran and Syria. Suspended in time, the Institute's analyses show which risks and challenges were known or foreseeable and which emerged without warning. This feature gives the anthology lasting value to those seeking to learn lessons from the intense and often bitter experiences of the invasion and its aftermath.

On March 1, 2003, The Washington Institute released [**U.S. Policy in Post-Saddam Iraq: Lessons from the British Experience \(templateC04.php?CID=138\)**](#), excerpts of which make up the first part of this anthology. That publication and other prewar analyses written by Institute scholars set the tone for the Institute's coverage of Iraq, making clear the potential pitfalls that faced an invading and occupying power.

In general, two apparently dichotomous impressions emerge from an analysis of the coalition experience in Iraq. On the one hand, U.S. and coalition military and civilian decisionmakers often knew only a fraction of what they needed to know about Iraq and Iraqis to make timely, high-quality decisions. On the other hand, with little attention paid to the lessons of the British experience or the contemporary history of Iraq's failed 1991 uprising, the West had forgotten much of what it had known and ignored much of what it could have learned about Iraq. Iraq's liberation and subsequent occupation (itself a dichotomy) was characterized by difficult choices between bad and worse alternatives. Every action or lack of action in Iraq had political costs as well as benefits, meaning that there was no ideal solution to most of the country's problems. Due partly to conditions outside its control and partly to policy choices, the coalition faced a far greater political, security, and economic vacuum in Iraq than it had anticipated, and early mistakes proved difficult to rectify. Indeed, the Iraq experience demonstrated that foreknowledge, detailed planning, and effective early adaptation of overarching plans are key prerequisites for future nation-building projects.

The Institute's coverage of Iraq documents the learning curve traced by the coalition, a painful process that eventually established a firm foundation for the new Iraqi Interim Government, the U.S. embassy, and the multinational forces. Much good and unheralded work was done by coalition military and civilian personnel throughout the occupation of Iraq, but it was not until the last few months -- in some cases weeks -- of coalition control that lasting and effective formulas for cooperation were developed in the areas of integrated security-forces training, streamlined disbursement of military aid, security coordination, and political partnership with legitimate Iraqi leaders. The future looks brighter: That is what visiting coalition military and political speakers have consistently told Institute audiences, and that is what the early performance of the new interim government suggests. It is striking that those who are in Iraq, those who are most familiar with the capabilities of Iraqis, are the most optimistic about the country's future.

No one doubts that the future will hold many challenges. Ensuring safe, fair, and free elections in winter 2004-2005 will provide the first major test for the new Iraq. Assuming the country can overcome this hurdle, 2005 will be a trying and decisive year, when many deferred issues concerning the fundamentals of the Iraqi state -- in particular,

the roles of religion and federalism -- will resurface during the national debate over the formation of a new constitution. Violence will almost certainly be a feature of this debate, but to what extent is unclear and highly dependent on the outcome of the preceding elections. U.S. returnees from Iraq voice quiet confidence that free and fair voting held against a backdrop of an inclusive political campaign will result in the election of a surprising number of moderate, secular representatives. One of the primary lessons of the past year and a half is that the United States and its allies need to enable this silent majority of Iraqis to find their voice. Moreover, the past thirteen years have shown that the job of fostering security and freedom in Iraq does not and should not end. Accordingly, The Washington Institute will continue to focus on this important, vibrant, and now free country.

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