CHAPTER TEN

THE IRAQ WAR

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Introduction

Few recent wars have been as controversial as the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. It aroused passionate public dispute around the world about what was happening, why it was happening, and whether it should be happening. Although the causes and ethics of the war remain contentious a decade after the invasion, the basic war-plot can be set out briefly and with less controversy. The Iraq War was a project of the United States (US), for which it sought to enlist international support by making the case that the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein supported terrorists, had aggressive designs on his neighbours, and was covertly developing weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) in breach of Security Council resolutions. Although some states were receptive to the US case, many others were not persuaded. French and Russian opposition made it impossible for the US to gain explicit authorisation for war from the Security Council, but the US was determined to overthrow Saddam’s regime. Coalition forces led by the US invaded on 20 March 2003, reaching Baghdad in less than three weeks but failing to find any evidence of WMDs. The Coalition’s efforts to construct a stable Iraqi state were soon undermined by an anti-occupation insurgency and rising levels of sectarian and inter-communal violence. The conflict, which took a heavy toll on Iraqis and US forces, peaked in 2006 before subsiding to levels at which withdrawal could be contemplated. The US ended combat operations in 2010, before finally withdrawing all its forces at the end of 2011.

This chapter narrates the most important events of the war, focusing the discussion on two major questions: how did the Iraq War become possible? And why did the Coalition occupation of Iraq descend into sectarian civil war? The first section examines what lay behind the US decision to remove Saddam Hussein, how the case for war could successfully be made domestically, and why the Bush administration’s claims over Iraq received a mixed reception internationally. After describing the brief ground war
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and the fall of the regime, the chapter moves on to examine the dynamics of the insurgency and the Coalition response against the background of efforts to stabilise and consolidate the Iraqi state. It concludes with a discussion of the costs and long term implications of the war.

1. The Road to War

The 2003 Iraq War was, in many respects, the continuation of a crisis initiated by Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait thirteen years earlier. The US responded to that attack by assembling a multinational military coalition that ejected Iraqi forces from Kuwait in January 1991 (Freedman & Karsh 1995). Iraq was easily defeated in the end, but had shown itself capable of threatening two major US strategic priorities in the Middle East. Firstly, Saddam threatened the security of Israel and regional stability when he fired missiles at several Israeli cities during the Gulf War. Israel was persuaded to stay out of the war, but the attacks aroused the ire of its powerful domestic supporters in the US who became convinced Israeli security depended on Saddam’s removal (Little 2004: 77–116; Mearsheimer & Walt 2007).

Secondly, and even more significantly, Saddam gained a degree of power over Persian Gulf oil that was unacceptable to the US. The Persian Gulf region contains more than half of the world’s proven reserves; US control of this oil not only ensures its continuous flow to American industry and world markets but gives the US a hegemonic position in the global economy (Harvey 2003: 18–25; Stokes 2007). Hegemony in the Persian Gulf has therefore been a key US policy objective in the Middle East since the Second World War (Little 2004: 43–76; Klare 2012). The fear that Persian Gulf oil could come under the control of unpredictable or hostile forces was behind a steadily increasing US military presence in the region from the late 1970s onwards, and it seemed borne out by Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait. Iraq already controlled ten percent of the world’s proven reserves; in occupying Kuwait, Saddam added a further ten percent, and his army also now sat within several hundred miles of another twenty five percent located in Saudi oilfields close to the Kuwaiti border. The power this gave Saddam over oil production and prices allowed him to threaten serious economic disruption and use this power to gain leverage over the US (Ritchie & Rogers 2007: 7–19).

After the Gulf War, the US pursued a policy of containment intended to control Saddam, if not force him from power (Mazaheri 2010). The US stationed troops in Kuwait, established a safe area in the north to protect