

WAR IN IRAQ 4 Jul 2014

The Lesson From Iraq: Never Again

By Michael Cornish

Australia must learn the lessons of our involvement in the ill-fated invasion of Iraq, writes Michael Cornish.

Mosul, the second biggest city in Iraq, has fallen to the jihadis.

The al-Qaeda affiliated Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant now has a real and quickly entrenching presence in northern Iraq.

The Syrian civil war has finally broken its banks and become a genuinely regional war; our only surprise should be that it has taken this long, and that Lebanon did not succumb to the vortex of Syrian violence first.

Critics in the United States are already playing the blame game of 'which President lost Iraq', with their conclusions as predetermined as their political leanings.

But before either side gets too smug, let us stop to think what the fall of Mosul and the smaller city of Tikrit really means - it means the next chapter of despair for the long-suffering people of Iraq.

And it will be despair.

The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant adheres to a fundamentalist interpretation of Sunni Islam, an interpretation that denies individual liberties and self-autonomy.

Women will be targeted by radicalised sharia law and their rights oppressed.

Religious minorities will be persecuted as heretics and apostates and violently crushed.

The voices of secularists, moderates and ethnic minorities will be silenced through all means at the jihadis' disposal.

Most terribly, every Iraqi person now under jihadi control will bear witness to the destruction of their nascent freedom to think, speak, and associate as they choose.

They have lost their freedom from fear.

Like the European revolutions of 1848, democracy in the Middle East has moved two steps forward and taken one step backwards, with only Tunisia - the birthplace of the Arab 'Spring' - holding any hope for making a lasting democratic transition.

Egypt is sliding back into authoritarianism, and Libya is in chaos.

Syria is being ripped apart, and - although few will yet admit it - the moderates have lost the war, crushed between the gears of radical jihadis and Bashar al-Assad's authoritarian police-state.

The lesson here is that the Middle East must continue to enlarge its swell of home-grown liberal democrats to a point where it is the dominant ideology and can eventually prevail.

Democracy cannot be compelled from abroad, only encouraged. Yet we can take some, if scant, solace that democratic pluralism and minority rights are the only sustainable answer to a region so criss-crossed with ethnic and sectarian division.

But what does this mean for us, so many miles away in Australia? Apart from - hopefully - engendering some compassion towards the suffering of our fellow human beings, it means that Iraq is now home to a greater global terrorist and geopolitical threat than ever it was under Saddam Hussein.

Despite claims by Dick Cheney to the contrary, Saddam never tolerated rivals to his grip on power, and crushed jihadis and would-be terrorists just as willingly as he did any other opposition to his rule.

The rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant marks the culmination of a decade of utter failure in American policy in the Middle-East.

Anglo-American power and the appeal of democracy has been deeply discredited by the prosecution of that unjust, pre-emptive war in Iraq.



Keywords: [iraq](#) [mosul](#) [saddam hussein](#)

Or, if you favour an alternative interpretation, discredited by their governments being too inept to read their own intelligence reports before embarking upon the invasion of another country.

The experiment in imposing democracy from the outside, and hoping for the success of a reverse domino theory, has failed.

The horror of Saddam has instead been replaced with the horror of *real* jihadis, and the swelling agony of a regional sectarian war.

Western blood and treasure have been squandered for nothing. Oh, how it rankles, but over the issue of Iraq, the French were right.

Despairingly, Australia is complicit in this Anglo-American failure.

It is all too convenient to forget that we went along for the ride and invaded a country of people about whom we knew little, and for whose future most of us care little.

There will be all too few people losing sleep in Australian homes for those now suffering under jihadi rule.

Certainly, we cannot be blamed for Islamic fundamentalism, for the pre-existing ethnic and religious divisions in Iraq, for the lack of broad commitment to pluralism and democracy, and - categorically - not for the latest round of brutalities by jihadis.

But by going to war, Australians have been complicit in stirring up those tensions and overturning Iraqi society, opening the way for the current contest of power in the country.

Unfortunately, that old adage seems all too true: the path to hell surely is paved with good - but ill-considered - intentions.

However, this is not a time for self-flagellation and 'told-you-so' guilt, but a time to genuinely reflect and learn from our mistakes.

Let us learn from our mistake of invading Iraq and yet again discover that well-worn phrase - never again.

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