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# Toll of U.S. invasion haunts Iraq

*Washington's reconstruction and remediation plan pales in comparison with the destruction left behind*

April 3, 2014 7:00AM ET

by [Lauren Carasik](#) @LCarasik

Eleven years ago, on March 19, 2003, the U.S. launched its “shock and awe” attack against Iraq. As with Russia’s annexation of Crimea last month, many criticized the [pre-emptive war in Iraq as a violation of international law](#). Last week, President Barack Obama [distinguished](#) the U.S. invasion of Iraq from Russia’s actions in Crimea, stating that “we ended our war and left Iraq to its people, and a fully sovereign Iraqi state could make decisions about its own future.” These sentiments echoed those he expressed to mark the final U.S. troop withdrawal from Iraq in December 2011, when he said, “[We’re leaving behind a sovereign, stable and self-reliant Iraq.](#)”

Facts belie Obama’s self-congratulatory assessment of a stable and democratic country. Iraq ranked 11th out of 178 countries in the 2013 [Failed States Index](#), making it more stable than Somalia and Afghanistan but less so than Syria. The current Shia government in Baghdad is often accused of the same abuses carried out by its Sunni predecessor. The rights of women, minorities and other vulnerable groups [continue to deteriorate](#). Millions have been dispossessed.

More than a decade after President George W. Bush’s premature “mission accomplished” victory exultation, the Iraq War is increasingly seen as a failure. A [Pew Research Center for the People and the Press](#) survey in January found rising pessimism about the war, with a majority of Americans saying the U.S. did not achieve its goals in Iraq and the use of military force was a mistake.

The staggering human and financial costs of the war make it unpopular for good reasons. The U.S. has spent [\\$815.8 billion](#) in Iraq since 2003. In a May 2013

report, Brown University's Watson Institute for International Studies concluded that the [final price tag](#), including the costs of caring for veterans for the next 40 years, would exceed \$2.2 trillion, not including interest. While the U.S. coffers are drained by the war, military [contractors amassed more than \\$138 billion](#).

Many people know that 4,488 American soldiers lost their lives in combat. But most assessments of the Iraq War grossly underestimate the full human toll of the invasion. Official estimates of more than 30,000 wounded in combat discount the tens of thousands of veterans who suffer from devastating physical, psychological and [moral injuries](#) and thousands [of suicides after vets return home](#). A recent study by American, Canadian and Iraqi health experts found that [500,000 Iraqi deaths](#) were attributable to the war. The tally includes death from indirect causes, such as failures of health, sanitation, transportation, communication and other systems. Still missing from this accounting is the fate of millions of Iraqis and Americans whose lives were rent asunder by the conflict — the families who lost loved ones and those struggling to support traumatized and ailing family members. Iraq's incapacity to rebuild its ravaged health and safety infrastructure extends the costs of the war into the distant future.

### **The U.S. should support Iraqis stricken by an unparalleled health crisis and clean up the environmental catastrophe we left in our wake.**

The invasion of Iraq brought neither stability nor democracy to the region. Gains in curbing post-invasion violence proved ephemeral. After the U.S. withdrew its forces, the carnage faded from the headlines. But, [according to the United Nations](#), more than 7,800 civilians were killed in Iraq in 2013. Sectarian violence between Sunni and Shia groups has surged. While Al-Qaeda was not present in Iraq before the invasion, it [recently claimed control over Fallujah and Ramadi](#). Iraq is now experiencing its [largest refugee crisis since the height of the war](#), with hundreds of thousands fleeing the fighting in Anbar province, located west of Baghdad near the border with Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. The instability now threatens to escalate into full civil war.

An unprecedented public health crisis in Iraq is also attributable to the war's legacy of chemical and incendiary weapons, depleted uranium and burn pits. Iraqi [doctors report](#) unprecedented spikes in birth defects, infant mortality and elevated pediatric cancer in Fallujah and its environs. The U.S. does not concede the causal connection between its use of novel munitions and the health crisis. But Dr. Chris Busby, a chemist from the University of Ulster who conducted two studies about the correlation between the use of weapons and the rates of disease in Iraq, said the findings revealed "[the highest rate of genetic damage in any population ever studied.](#)"

Despite the devastation the U.S. left behind, Washington's reconstruction and remediation plan for Iraq was woefully inadequate. Planning focused more on securing and upgrading oilfields for foreign investment than providing humanitarian support and cleaning up the lethal waste left behind. The lack of accountability and oversight of reconstruction efforts has [allowed pervasive corruption](#) and squandered much of the \$60 billion allocated to reconstruction by the United States.

Afflicted Iraqi citizens and American veterans are left with depleted resources and little recourse. But there is an increasing demand for a full accounting and reparations. The [Right to Heal](#) campaign, led by a coalition of advocacy groups including the Center for Constitutional Rights, the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq and Iraq Veterans Against the War, has brought much-needed attention to the ongoing suffering through comprehensive documentation of the [war's enduring harms](#).

Many observers now concede that the war was a humanitarian and political disaster. But that admission alone is not enough. The U.S. should support Iraqis stricken by an unparalleled health crisis, clean up the environmental catastrophe we left in our wake, provide services for our vets bearing visible and unseen wounds and, to the extent that we can avoid compounding our prior mistakes, help to rebuild and stabilize the country.

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*The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera America's editorial policy.*