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PETER KRAUSE: Welcome to today's MIT Starr Forum on the Iraq Invasion-- 20 Years Later. I'm Peter Krause, an associate professor of political science at Boston College and current visiting fellow at the Crown Center for Middle East Studies just down the road here at Brandeis University. I'm also a proud PhD graduate of the MIT political science department, which I joined in the early years of the Iraq War, nearly 20 years ago.

I remember entering campus amidst the rising insurgency in Iraq and the growing realization that many of the perceptions held in the lead-up to the war, by both the Bush administration and much of the American public, were misguided. It is important to look back today and discuss, not just the decision to invade, but also the conflicts, conduct, and legacy that Iraqis, the US, and the broader Middle East are living with today. I can't think of three better people to hear from than our three excellent panelists, who all bring different but powerful experiences and analysis to the table.

Before we get started, I'd like to thank the MIT Center for International Studies and the MIT Security Studies Program, the sponsors of today's event. I also want to mention that we will have time for Q&A at the end of our talk. If you haven't already, please find the Q&A feature at the bottom of your toolbar. This is where you can type in your questions, and we will hopefully get to as many as possible at the end of this talk. In addition, please pay attention to the chat feature, also on the bottom toolbar. We'll be sending out resource links, such as bios, upcoming events, and other information that may be of interest to you.

And now, let me introduce you to our speakers. I'll be sharing a very brief bio, but please note there will be a link to their full bios in the chat. First, we have Marsin Alshamary, who recently received her PhD from the MIT political science department, and who I am personally overjoyed to say will be joining me at Boston College as an assistant professor of political science this fall. Marsin is an expert on religion, civil society, and social movements in the Shi'a Middle East. Marsin is also Iraqi, and has spent much of the past few years working in Iraq.

Roger Petersen, the Arthur and Ruth Sloan Professor of Political Science at MIT, is an expert on emotions in politics, military intervention, civil-military relations, and within-state conflict and violence. And he taught me much of what I on these topics. He just returned from a research visit to Iraq himself, and his book, *Death, Domination, and State-Building-- The US in Iraq and the Future of American Intervention,* is now forthcoming with Oxford University Press.

And finally, we have Steven Simon, the Robert E Wilhelm fellow at CIS, who served as the National Security Council Senior Director for the Middle East and North Africa during the Obama administration and as the NSC Senior Director for Counterterrorism in the Clinton White House. These assignments followed a 15-year career at the US State Department and academic teaching posts. His forthcoming book is *Grand Delusion-- The Rise and Fall of American Ambition in the Middle East,* coming out with Penguin Random House April, 2023, so I guess maybe just next month. You can pick that up.

Welcome to all three of you. It is an honor to have you here with us. We will start by having each speaker talk for 10 to 15 minutes about the origins, conduct, and legacy of the Iraq War. Then I will lead a brief discussion of the panelists before we turn to your questions. So, Steven Simon is going to lead us off. Steve, the floor is yours.

STEVEN SIMON: Thank you very much, Peter. Appreciate the kind introduction and appreciate CIS and MIT for scheduling--

PETER KRAUSE: And Steve, great. I just wanted to say your camera is off. So if you turn that on, we'll be able to see you.

STEVEN SIMON: OK. Is that better or worse?

PETER KRAUSE: That works. You look great.

STEVEN SIMON: OK. The roots of that second Gulf War lie in the first Gulf War. I know this sounds like ancient history, but I think it's worth pointing out for perspective. In the late 1980s, the Bush administration tried to tighten relations with Iraq for a couple of reasons. Trade was one. And as a balance against Iraq was the other.

The trade question was essentially a domestic political one. The Midwestern farm states, championed by Senator Robert Dole of Kansas, saw grain sales to Iraq as a gift that would keep on giving. The Iran-Contra scandal that had broken out in President Reagan's second term, it involved the sale of weapons to Iran in the midst of the Iraq-Iran War. That had unfolded not long before this. And although the Reagan administration tried to limit the damage by doubling down on support for Iraq and its war with Iran, the Bush administration still faced a skeptical Baghdad.

Efforts to get on Saddam's good side in the late 1980s were unavailing. Problems kept popping up. Genocidal massacres in Iraq, nuclear proliferation concerns, threats against Israel-- all the noise made it hard to gauge the seriousness of Saddam's threats at that time to his Gulf Arab neighbors. When he made his move by invading Kuwait in 1991-- in 1990-- the US response was shaped by a mix of old world concerns like appeasement and new world exuberance fueled by the end of the Cold War. And the administration-- the Bush administration-- was geared toward war from the get go, from the moment that Iraq invaded Kuwait in August of 1990.

Now the war, when it came, was seriously botched-- that is, by the United States. Saddam was left with eight Republican Guard divisions and control of his airspace. The US had pulled out of the theater of operations almost immediately, but not before imposing ceasefire requirements on Iraq that would require occupation to enforce effectively. These seem like rookie errors, but they took place. But they happened.

Now, Bush conducted his reelection campaign back in the United States with a skill commensurate to the way in which the military campaign was carried out against Iraq. And he lost to a scandal-plagued young governor from Arkansas, Bill Clinton. The new administration adhered to a kind of stylized improvisation on the new world order theme advanced by the Bush administration, but infusing it with an "end of history" feeling.

But the Clinton administration had no idea of what to do with Iraq except to carry out its weapons of mass destruction inspection program, which, in turn, entailed grinding the population down through sanctions and to dream about regime change while turning the administration's attention to NATO expansion and war in the Balkans. These were fields of jihad of much greater importance in Washington than was Iraq.

When I left the Clinton administration at the end of that decade for London, the then-Chief of the UK General Staff, something's up in this way in a conversation that we had after my arrival. He said, there are really only three options. The first is to reintegrate Saddam into the international community. That was the French and Russian approach. Continue existing policy, which was the US, UK, and Dutch approach. Or kill Saddam-- and those, he said, were the only three options for resolving the ongoing impasse. And I think it was a fair summary.

Now, when Bush's heir-- that is, George W. Bush-- took to the White House, he wasn't focused on Iraq. His focus was on the great powers, rather than on social work, as Clinton's foreign policy had been derided by critics. Then came 9/11. This was a profoundly deranging event in US postwar history.

Now, why precisely this tragedy led to the invasion of Iraq has been closely studied by journalists and scholars, most recently by Mel Leffler, a distinguished diplomatic historian. Well, let me take the opportunity right now to say that every single one of these commentators and analysts is absolutely right about everything they said, because the war, as I'll explain in a moment, was more or less overdetermined.

But it was overdetermined, really, only in the context of a Bush presidency. And I say that because I'm not aware of anyone who believes that a President Gore would have gone after Iraq in the wake of 9/11, assuming that a Gore White House would have failed to prevent it, in itself an interesting counterfactual. It goes without saying that had George H.W. Bush not gone to war against Iraq without reconciling his war aims with his own administration's rather modest commitment to the war, Saddam would not have been in George W. Bush's gun sight on September 12.

Now, I've got a list of a half a dozen mutually reinforcing reasons that the George W. Bush administration used to justify its war against Iraq. And I'll just name them very quickly. One-- and in no particular order, one was the doctrine of prevention. That became a Bush administration strategic doctrine in the summer of the 9/11 attacks. There was a fixation on Iraq by members of the George H.W. Bush administration who had returned to government service under George W. Bush.

There was a belief, heavily promoted by the vice president, Dick Cheney, that Iraq was complicit in 9/11. There was a belief that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and would use them against the United States. There was the allure of shock and awe as a military doctrine and an interest in trying it out. There was an impulse to replicate the greatest generation, to wear daddy's overcoat, in a way. And the numerous references to World War II in the context of the 2003 invasion of Iraq are just fascinating to review.

There was a desire to tidy up the new world order on the view that democracies were by nature peaceful and didn't make war against one another. There was an uncalled for confidence in expatriate Iraqis, who spun a tale of an easy transition to democracy in Iraq following an invasion. And there was a need for a decisive military response to 9/11, since the United States couldn't very well bomb Hamburg or Saudi Arabia or UAE, the places from which the attackers, the hijackers, hailed from.

At that time, I was on a panel at the Aspen Institute along with George Shultz, who had been Secretary of State in the Reagan administration. And when the question came up, should the United States invade Iraq, I said no. And George Shultz, he was very angered by this. And he got up and he walked out, saying, well, then who should we invade, if not Iraq? That just-- it's emblematic of the spirit of the time.

Anyway, this was a real witch's brew. On WMD, war advocates defend the belief that Saddam had WMD is a reasonable inference from Saddam's uneven cooperation with the UN inspection regime, and a leap from there to assert that war was the only option to deal with this problem. Yet, there had been eight years of intrusive inspections that failed to turn up anything significant. Prior to the war-- the 2003 war-- Hans Blix, the head of the UN inspection apparatus, conceded that there was nothing to be found. Thus, looking back, the war was a nonsequitur to a non-problem.

So, let me close by talking about the results, briefly, from my [AUDIO OUT]. I was grimly amused to see Peter Feaver describe the war in the last issue of *Foreign Affairs* as a modest [AUDIO OUT], because it wasn't [AUDIO OUT]. But one does wonder what he means by this.

The life cycle financial cost of the war to the United States stands at about $3 trillion. It triggered a civil war that killed scores of thousands of Iraqis and opened the door to an ISIS invasion of Syria that resulted in a tragedy for the Yazidi people, the destruction of much of Mosul and other cities, and catalyzed the growth and consolidation of the popular mobilization forces in Iraq. All of this followed a decade of pulverizing sanctions.

And here, I think we need to [AUDIO OUT] John Tirman, who was professor at MIT until he passed away recently. [INAUDIBLE] on this. Strategically, the war was a mindboggling blunder because it empowered Iran. And the United States is still dealing with that [AUDIO OUT].

PETER KRAUSE: Thank you very much, Steve. I appreciate you giving us the context and some of the background for the decision to go to war in the early days. And I think Roger's going to pick us up from there and talk a bit about the context of the conflict, before we turn to Marsin for talking a bit about Iraq today and legacy. So, thank you so much, Steve. Roger, the floor is now yours.

ROGER PETERSEN: All right. Thank you very much for having me. Given the limited amount of time, I'm going to make just two points, one about the sectarian nature of the conflict in Iraq, and the other about US counterinsurgency strategy. So first, on the sectarian nature of the conflict-- although I spent much of the last 10 years working on the Iraq War and its aftermath, over the course of my career, I have studied war and violence more broadly.

And as some of you might know, my general findings on group conflicts support particular assumptions about human nature, specifically, that people strongly identify with groups, people readily perceive a hierarchy of status ordering a states' groups, the perception of unjust position of one's group on this hierarchy can motivate support or participation in violence, and relatedly, ethnic and sectarian violent conflict is most likely in a period of unstable hierarchy, and especially when dominant groups perceive a status reversal. Ethnic conflict will likely subside once a clear and stable hierarchy re-emerges.

Certainly, not all conflicts are struggles for dominance within a changing hierarchy. But the Iraq case fits this very well. Put bluntly, Shi'a groups now own the Iraqi state. Sunnis and Kurds are basically renters and subordinate partners. There are conflicts in Iraq. Look in last August, seeing violent ones. But they are now between the dominant Shi'a factions. With the new clear and stable ethnic sectarian hierarchy, an era of sectarian struggle is largely ended.

So, how did the Shi'a win? First, the majority, and second, as I said, they had the motivating resentments of an unjust group position between the state. Sunnis had been historically dominant, basically forever. But there was also a Shi'a advantage in effective organization. First, the [INAUDIBLE] organization had been waiting in Iran. They were well trained as a outgrowth of the Republican Guards. They were disciplined, and they had a plan to come in and dominate the Ministry of Interior and other security-oriented parts of the government.

Muqtada al-Sadr could easily mobilize mass protests and raise fighters from his base in the giant slums of Sadr City. He could build off the reputation and organizations left by his uncle and father. And although the Jaysh al-Mahdi militia which he, Sadr, created was often undisciplined, it could put military force out on the street. The social services of the Sadr organization and the Office of the Martyr Sadr could become alternative social sources to the state.

The so-called special groups-- I'm talking about AAH or the League of the Righteous or Kata'ib Hezbollah or the Battalions of the Party of God, Splinters from Sadr. They were well-funded by Iran, especially in terms of providing IEDs that killed a lot of US soldiers. Moreover, the nature of Shi'a religious practice produced focal points and centralized communications. The Shi'a mosques' adherents heard the same messages.

On the other hand, Sunnis, they were also motivated by a perception of status reversal, now becoming underneath the Shi'a. You see the boycott of the elections of 2005. But in terms of organization, they were reliant mainly on former Ba'athist networks, which actually were sort of weak mobilization bases. In terms of outside support, they relied on al-Qaeda. In Anbar, the tribal organizations were focused on local power, at least before the awakening.

Meanwhile, since 2003, the Kurds squandered an opportunity to construct a unified quasi-state in the north. The United States in all of this focused mainly on former Ba'athists and al-Qaeda. And indeed, Sunni extremists planted many bombs and killed many civilians and US soldiers. But the larger and longer battle was won by the Shi'a.

The US was not ready when the Jaysh al-Mahdi began sweeping through Baghdad, cleansing neighborhood after neighborhood, and transforming Baghdad's very demography. The US forces were often left to put up T walls that reinforced Shi'a consolidation of neighborhoods.

Now, this process is going to conclude at the end of the ISIS War, and you're going to get a new clarity of hierarchy. Many Sunnis had retained a belief in regaining their former dominant status on the eve of the ISIS invasion. But any remaining belief in such recovery was destroyed by the ISIS War. In that war, a Sunni organization-- the Islamic State-- produced nothing but destruction of Sunni cities and lives.

On the other hand, the Shi'a militias, in the form of the Hashd al-Shaabi or the popular mobilization forces, had been a key force in driving ISIS out of Iraq. The war produced desolation among Sunnis and pride and confidence among Shi'a. For the Kurds, the Independence Referendum of 2017 clarified a subordinate position within the Iraqi state. Since 2003, Kurds had taken control over much of the so-called disputed territory. But after the referendum, a combination of government and Arab forces aided by the Kurdish Patriotic Union of Kurdistan rolled back Kurdish control to the 2003 lines.

Despite an overwhelming vote for independence in the referendum, the post-referendum moves on the ground by the Shi'a-dominated government, combined with international indifference to the outcome and the fate of the Kurds, showed that independence was still only an aspiration, not close to reality. Today, the KRG remains politically divided and troubled.

So let me switch to my second point, which is about the US strategy in Iraq. So, there's often a straightforward story told about US strategy in Iraq. At the beginning, the US forces were not at all prepared to do counterinsurgency. So they often relied on basic war fighting methods, which meant excessive firepower and kinetic violence. These were often inappropriate and counterproductive.

But, as the story goes, the help of a new field manual-- FM 324-- produced and associated with General Petraeus, US forces turned to the population-centric strategy often termed "clear, hold, build." The US soldiers would leave their giant forward operating bases to take positions at command outposts within the population. There would be a period of high violence to clear out insurgent forces, followed by a hold incorporating Iraqi forces, and then a build involving visible improvements in schools, hospitals, roads, and services.

The goal was to convince the population that the future lay with the Iraqi government, not the insurgents. The state and US forces would gather information from this population. And all the while, the US forces would be helping Iraqi forces to take over. Many argue that this change in strategy produced a dramatic decrease in violence seen in the surge.

But as the case studies of my project illustrate, the story is not so straightforward. There were not just the two strategies mentioned, war fighting and clear, hold, build. But there's also community mobilization, which relied on deal-making with local actors. This was best seen in the awakening in Anbar. There was also decapitation, which meant not only killing insurgent leaders, but taking out the middle levels of insurgent networks. This strategy, best illustrated by the increasing capabilities of JSOC, the Joint Special Operations Command led by Stanley McChrystal, whose motto was find, fix, finish, exploit, analyze.

A fifth strategy, basically tacit explicit, is homogenization, allowing and enforcing the separation of populations to develop defensible positions among the warring sides. These five strategies were used in varying combinations at different locations and times across Iraq. The fighting was also highly decentralized. Company-level commanders, captains leading 100 to 140 soldiers or so, often had great discretion and often made deals with local opponents.

In effect, there was not one war in Iraq, but many different types of wars depending on local conditions. I once thought there were four wars in Iraq-- in Baghdad, in the South, in the North, and Anbar. But after doing years of interviews and case studies, it may be better to think of there being dozens of wars going on, depending on local conditions.

So let me finish here by talking about US successes, because I'm sure you've been reading about all the failures of the US military in Iraq. But there weren't just failures. There were also successes. The US had two major goals in Iraq-- to bring down violence and to build a functional state. And the US military was actually pretty good in bringing down violence in many cases. It was not so good in state building. These outcomes should not be surprising, given what the US military was created to do.

The US military also became highly proficient in finding, fixing, and finishing. By the time of the ISIS War, the US also became better at selecting partners to aid in decapitation. In the ISIS War, the US worked with highly effective partnership with the Iraq counterterrorism forces. One last point-- I think going forward, the experience in Iraq provided the US military and intelligence knowledge and abilities for a version of what Paul Stanley calls "violent management."

Relying on selected local partners, probably special forces, and using precision-guided weapons, the United States may now be able to engage in what Israelis term "mowing the lawn" on a worldwide basis. The US could give up on nation-building. That was seen as the best way to prevent insurgencies in the long term, by building strong states. Give up on that and just take on a greater lawn mowing mission. And in fact, Biden's comments after the withdrawal of Afghanistan suggest this mission is ongoing. I think whether the US wants to be the world's lawn mower, big question, one I think the Security Studies Program at MIT should take up. Thank you very much.

PETER KRAUSE: Thank you so much, Roger, for delving into the conflict itself. And I think that this type of disaggregation and detail is, I'm sure, what we have to look forward to in your forthcoming book on the Iraq War and US intervention. So I look forward to asking some questions about that in just a moment.

But for now, we're going to turn to Marsin, who I believe is going to take us from some of the conflict up closer to present day in terms of Iraqi society and the legacy of the conflict. So, Marsin, the floor is yours. Looking forward to your comments.

MARSIN ALSHAMARY: Thank you, Peter. Good morning, everyone. Good evening to those in the Middle East. I'm very grateful for the opportunity to speak in a space that I value and that I had great memories in, and to speak alongside my mentors.

I'm also in Baghdad right now, which means that I'm going to take this as an opportunity to transport you all to Iraq today and talk about what it looks like and what everyday life is for Iraqis, and how that differs from 2003. I think both Roger and Steve have done an excellent job, really, of laying the ground for the international relations aspect of where Iraq is today, as well as the historical legacies that have brought it to its present state. But I think what's also really important to focus on is what everyday life in the country is for its citizens and what opportunities and challenges lie ahead.

In order to really set the scene, I'm going to start by describing demographically what Iraq looked like in 2003 versus what it looks like today. Iraq today is a much more populated country than it was in 2003. In 2003, the population of Iraq was about 27 million. Today, there are 43 million Iraqis, with continued growth projections in the future.

The Iraq of today is also a much younger population than it was in 2003. The average Iraqi is 21 years old. That means the average Iraqi was born in 2002, with little memory of the invasion, the occupation, and of course, little memory of the Ba'athist era, as well. I'm happy to talk more later about what this means for expectations and memories of authoritarianism and expectations of democracy in the future.

Iraq today is also a much less diverse country than it was in 2003. The 2003 war and the subsequent waves of violence from the civil war in 2005, '07, and '08, to the ISIS War from 2014 to 2017 had harmful effects on minority and Indigenous communities and has caused flight and displacement. For example, Iraq's Assyrian community was estimated to be at 700,000 pre-2003, but has dwindled to 150,000 in 2020. The Christian community, more broadly, was numbered at 1.4 million, and has now fallen to 250,000. That's a very dramatic change. Steve alluded to the Yazidi community's similar decimation under the ISIS genocide.

But in addition to the changes in waves of migration, there's also changes within the country where the identities of various areas have been changing due to the political influence of certain actors. You see this in parts of Iraq that are not only controlled by Baghdad, by the central government, but also by the regional government in Iraqi Kurdistan.

This is also a reminder that Iraq has not held a credible census since 1957. And attempts to hold a census, which we've seen over the years, have floundered in the face of political interests. Because there is a ethnosectarian system for allocating government positions, there's very little incentive to challenge the allotment and to challenge the current setup, and very little appetite to have a census that might give some actors more power than they had received and take away some power from others.

So this is the system that has been in place since 2005 with Iraq's first parliamentary election. We've seen six parliamentary elections since and seven prime ministers. The system has endured counterinsurgency and terrorism, as Roger was detailed. A civil war in the mid-2000s that was devastating-- I mean, I remember a time period in which every day, there was news of car bombings in Baghdad. It was a truly devastating time.

There was a very brief moment of respite before the ISIS takeover of a third of the country in 2014, a long war until 2017 to remove ISIS from Iraq, followed by the Kurdish referendum that Roger spoke of-- that was an attempt at seceding from Iraq that was thwarted in 2017. In 2019, the country had mass protests that brought the government to a halt for a few months.

So what I'm trying to say is that, since 2003, Iraq has had rare opportunities and stability and very few opportunities to breathe. It's always been in a state of firefighting one issue or another. In 2019, the protest movement that I spoke of culminated in a resignation of the prime minister and called for early elections under a new electoral law. In 2021, we saw those elections. And they followed were followed by a year of political negotiations for government formation.

In that year, there was a dramatic resignation of 73 MPs from the Sadrist party, which is one of the big Shi'a political parties that doesn't actually have very strong ties or good relations with the other Shi'a political parties. Roger was alluding to the weakening of ties and to the internal conflict among different groups in Iraq, and that was an example of it.

During this time, we saw a very violent stand down in Baghdad's International Zone, which is a fortified area in Baghdad with important government offices and the UN compound, as well as foreign missions. And it took us over a year before we formed the government. And now, speaking today in March, we're five months into the premiership of Iraq's seventh prime minister, Mohammed Al Sudani. It took a lot of effort to get to this point. And as I told you from my brief overview of what happened in Iraq, there were very few moments of actual stability in this time.

But the challenges that confront everyday Iraqis are-- the challenges that confront the nation from the perspective of everyday Iraqis aren't what you would think they are. Iraqis have moved from fearing and worrying most about security and most about terrorism and instability, to having concerns about economic issues and about corruption. If you look at the latest polling from the Arab Barometer, which took place during the pandemic, Iraqis think that the most important challenge facing their country is corruption. 26% of Iraqis chose corruption as a challenge that they thought was most important.

This was followed by the pandemic, which is no longer relevant, as Iraq has moved past it, and then followed by the economic situation, in which 16% of Iraqis expressed concern. The reason Iraqis are concerned with economic challenges more than security challenges is because most of them, like I said, are young and are confronting issues of employment. But they also mostly live in secure cities that no longer have to contend with bombings or terrorism that they had to 10 years ago.

The key issue in Iraq today, the thing that people will talk about on the street, is the issue of corruption. It's pervasive in Iraq. Iraq is the 23rd most corrupt country in the world in 2022. In November 2022, journalists covered what was called the Heist of the Century, in which $2.5 billion were stolen through tax audit officials from a state-owned bank. And Iraqis watched as this money was taken, knowing full well that the state would not be able to recover a significant portion of it, given the interest of the entrenched political and economic elite in the country.

And Iraqis attribute this corruption to consociationalism, to the system that was put in place post-2003. But even though they make this attribution, the roots of corruption predate 2003. And the post-2003 era actually fanned corruption in ways that are usually not talked about. This isn't just about a sectarian consociational system that fueled patronage. But it's also about policies in US reconstruction efforts that were notoriously ill-managed and corrupt and which set a standard going forward.

But in addition to corruption, Iraqis are concerned about economic well-being. And that's very similar to other people in the Middle East. According to the World Bank, the unemployment in Iraq right now is 16.2%, which is quite high. This is a continuous challenge because, as I said, the Iraqi population is very young and very reliant on public sector employment, whereas public sector employment accounts for 60% of employment in Iraq. This has taken up anywhere between a fifth and a quarter of Iraq's GDP in the last two years. And Iraq finances this mainly through oil, on which it is extremely dependent.

It doesn't take a mathematician or an economist to figure out that this is not a successful formula going forward, and that we'll confront issues of stability. And it continues in this way because there is a legacy from prior to 2003 of public sector hiring, and of post-2003 continuation of this legacy through patronage politics.

A lot of attention has been paid to economic reform internally. There was a very famous white paper written by the former finance minister, Ali Allawi. But there's been really little appetite to tackle the issue because it's a hot button topic for the population. Average Iraqi will protest for getting a job. And it's also an easy vehicle for political parties to dole out patronage and to ensure turnout and support from their constituents.

But the effect of this lack of socioeconomic rights, the lack of economic development, of high unemployment in Iraq has been that it's cast a negative light on what democracy means in general. If we go back to the Arab Barometer, 72% of Iraqis that were surveyed either agreed or strongly agreed that economic performance is weak under a democratic system, and 80% of them agreed or strongly agreed that so long as economic problems are solved, it doesn't matter if a system is democratic or not.

I can talk in much more detail later on about the state of democratization in Iraq and Iraqi views towards democratization, but as you can see, this is very similar to patterns that emerge elsewhere in the region, and particularly in Tunisia, which had the similar jarring experience between the lack of complementarity and growth of democratic institutions and of socioeconomic rights.

Of course, there are countless other issues that confront Iraq. And I can talk about those in detail going forward. But this includes things like environmental degradation and climate change. Iraq is facing water scarcity issues, very high temperatures. And there's still existing pockets of terrorism, insecurity in particular areas in Iraq, and along borders. There's the issue of repatriation of Iraqis that are adjacent to or affiliated with ISIS that are in the Al-Hol camp in northeast Syria. This has been described by many, including the UN, as a ticking time bomb for Iraq, particularly on the security sector. And of course, there's the big issue, which is Iraq lacks a monopoly on violence, and that there are significant political parties with armed groups. And that really does cast a negative light on the democratization process in Iraq.

However, while there are challenges in Iraq today, there are also opportunities and assets. Iraq has a very young and vibrant and brave civil society, one that has developed very quickly despite it only being 20 years since they've had room to breathe. Iraq is beset by challenges, but it still has more democratic institutions than many neighboring countries. And if you look at many indicators, particularly from varieties of democracy, which political scientists rely on, it outperforms the regional average on things like academic freedom, like civil society participation, like electoral democracy. And it is a far cry from where it was prior to 2003, under a dictatorial and genocidal state.

Iraq is also wealthy enough to weather many a storm that has destroyed other countries. People often forget that oil is a double-edged sword. It's not just a resource curse, which we hear about a lot, but it also allows a country to buy enough time to get on its feet and to find stability.

Iraq has also shed its skin as a pariah state in the region. It's developed good ties with its regional neighbors. This isn't just about Iran, of course. This is about closer ties with the Gulf Cooperation Council, closer ties to Egypt and to Jordan and to Turkey, something that Iraq wasn't able to have pre-2003 in the same way. And it's very significant, because this is the first Shi'a Arab dominant state in the region that was able to forge good ties with predominantly Sunni Arab states in the region.

So 20 years after the invasion, I'm comforted by the fact that Iraq has moved on from having very exceptional problems like the invasion of a superpower or the taking over of territory by a genocidal terrorist group, to having very unexceptional problems, like unemployment, corruption, climate change, problems that other countries have to contend with as well, and problems that Iraq can find partners to work on these issues with. Thank you.

PETER KRAUSE: Wonderful. Thank you so much, Marsin. Great to hear from all three of our panelists. I want to remind everyone in the audience that we're going to now turn to discussion and question and answer. So, I'm going to ask all three of our panelists-- Roger, Steve, and Marsin-- to turn on their cameras and unmute themselves, because we're going to engage with all of you. And I'll just remind some members of our audience, we already have some great questions in the Q&A. But please add some more in response to what you heard from our panelists as well as the discussion that we're going to start now.

I'm going to start by asking a couple of questions to the panelists. But then I'm going to turn to and read some of your questions and have them respond. So I actually want to start with you, Marsin. In preparation for this panel, I read some things you've written before on this stuff. And you had this really fascinating quote where you said, "It's 20 years for us, but for an average Iraqi, it may as well have been 200 years." You also mentioned your talk that the average Iraqi is 21 and has little memory of the invasion and early years of the war.

So one of the things I wanted to start by asking you is just what did you mean by that first statement? And how does the issue of time impact how Iraqis are thinking about their future today? Could you expand on that a little bit?

MARSIN ALSHAMARY: Yeah, absolutely. So I'll tell a story that I've been telling in a lot of different outlets. So, apologies if someone's heard this twice. Roger was visiting in Baghdad just last week. And we went together to the Martyr Monument in Baghdad, which was built by Saddam to commemorate the soldiers from the Iran-Iraq War. Since then, it's been repurposed to commemorate Iraqis that have been victims of the former regime, as well as victims of ISIS and so on.

But when you first enter the museum, underneath the monument, there is this very large poster of Saddam Hussein. It spans maybe the length of four people. And it says, "The dictator, the tyrant." And it's a very horrible picture of him. And Roger and I were looking as these young Iraqis, who are decked out in their graduation clothes, are just walking by without even noticing the photo, without even looking at it, and just taking photos of themselves for graduation by different parts of the museum that were aesthetically pleasing.

And to me, this was very symbolic of the fact that these Iraqis have no memory of Saddam Hussein. They have no memory of the American invasion. And their formative years were actually under the sectarian civil wars, both the 2005 war and the ISIS War. So the biggest challenge and the biggest tragedy in Iraq to them is for Iraq to fall into sectarian violence. It's not a dictatorship.

And what this means is that they have very high standards for what democracy should look like. They're not satisfied that they can say what they want about the prime minister without being taken to the side and being killed. That's a very low bar for them. They want stability. They want economic rights. And they want to be able to express themselves as a given.

And for that reason, you do notice this slight trend of strong man-- not Saddam Hussein nostalgia, but strong man nostalgia-- in Iraq, which is the idea that, is democracy even worth it if we don't have stability and economic well-being, without really thinking about what they would lose if they lost the current system today. I mean, as flawed as it is, it does give rights that hadn't existed prior to 2003.

But I think these Iraqis, they're young. They don't remember 2003 at all. And they're very forward-looking. And I think that's a good thing, because their standards for what democracy should look like should be set by their own experiences and not necessarily by the trauma of the Ba'athist past.

PETER KRAUSE: I think that's very well said. Roger, I wanted to turn to you and ask a question related to your presentation, which is, your book title has this thing in it where you say, "The Future of US Intervention." And you talked a bit about the Israeli model using this term, "mowing the lawn." And a question I wanted to ask you actually goes back to something you taught me back in the day in political science. You use this term, "tactical victories and strategic defeats," basically, the idea that using certain strategies can lead to oh, this is a battlefield success, or, this seems like a successful operation, but in the long run, you're not actually succeeding in achieving your political objective.

And so what I wanted to ask you is, can you talk to us about what do you see as the future of US intervention? And also, to what extent would a, quote unquote, "mowing the lawn" strategy-- which I assume means small footprint, not having large US forces on the ground, using drone strikes, partnerships, et cetera, maybe going in terms of this more counterterrorism strategy-- to what extent is that actually successful? And if we're looking at the Israeli model, is that something that the US should want to emulate? I'm interested to know your thoughts.

ROGER PETERSEN: Yeah, I really don't want my country to be the lawn mower of the world, you know? But that's the easier thing to do. And that's what technology-- it's hard to stop. I think in the book, I'm going to start in the Iraq War, that there were-- as I was talking about successes, starting with the Battle for Sadr City in 2008, the United States got very good at using their decapitation success in retaking Sadr City and integrating with certain forces on the ground.

Now, which forces do we do? We have a big mission to build up other states' armies. One of the things in Iraq, and especially in Afghanistan, was the United States learned a lesson. We can't really build up competent forces that are going to stand up and fight for their country. And that's what-- if the Afghani army is not going to fight, why should the United States be supporting them? And you saw what happened to the Iraqi army. But you did get close partnership with counterterrorism service forces in Iraq during the ISIS War.

So this is where I think it's going. But now, the Ukraine War and how it turns out may actually provide some different lesson, because there, we do have a partner who is certainly willing to fight and die and is able to incorporate not just counterterrorism, but attrition-type weapons. So I think we're really in a state of flux where the United States, between giving up on some of the things in the Middle East wars, but now with the Ukrainian War-- and it depends on how that turns out. What are we going to do? And how much do we want to be involved around the country, I mean, around the world?

I mean, the United States military has relationships with something like 200 militaries around the world. How do we want to use that? How much do we want to be involved? How much do we use-- even the nature of our special forces. There's two forms of special forces-- the Green Berets, who were all about building up local forces. There's analogies between Daniel Boone, being the person who goes out in the wilderness and forms relationships with the local forces, or Superman, which is the JSOC guys who come in and whack somebody and move on.

I think in the Iraq War, there was a real tendency to go towards the JSOC Superman model of the special forces. And we may have a big debate upon whether we go back to the Green Beret type way. So I think this whole discussion about the future of military intervention is an open one, although I think we're not going to be seeing clear, hold, build and nation building for a long, long time. That one is just-- you can't really talk about that.

And one unfortunate thing about the war colleges, I think, is counterinsurgency is a dirty word. And you don't really want to think about it. That's a repeat of Vietnam. After Vietnam, there were lessons. But those lessons were long forgotten. And I'm hoping this time around there's still going to be some interest in this, although most of the military wants to go and do the things they like to do, which are peer competition, flying airplanes, building boats, and this kind of thing. But the Iraq War, I think, left us these certain set of capabilities and a certain set of ideas that are not formed. And I'm not sure whether they're going to be formed until after the Ukraine thing is settled.

PETER KRAUSE: Thank you very much, Roger. I could go back and forth with you and Marsin all day on this stuff. But I want to bring Steve in here and actually build on something Roger mentioned about lessons. And so Steve, in your presentation, you talked about how to understand the 2003 invasion, we need to understand the first Gulf War and the lessons and legacies that come out of that.

And so, the question I wanted to ask you is, what do you feel like are the lessons that the United States government is taking away from the 2003 conflict which, by the way, as we'll get to in just a moment, has not necessarily fully ended. We still have 2,500 US troops in Iraq. But what do you feel like are the lessons that the US has taken from this most recent Iraq War? And do you feel like those are the right lessons for what we should be learning from this conflict and what happened?

STEVEN SIMON: That's a great question. And it's one I really can't answer. I mean, I have no idea what lessons the United States, as a strategic actor, has extracted from the 2003 war. I mean, it's often said-- and I think there's some truth to it-- that the United States, for example, didn't intervene in the civil war in Syria in 2011 and 2012 because of a collective memory of the mess that took place in Iraq after the 2003 invasion and a desire to avoid that kind of damaging entanglement.

So perhaps that's a lesson. And I think Roger's point about counterinsurgency being a becoming a dirty word, I think there's some truth to that. And there's an attraction to going back to the old J and K series divisions in the army, fighting major maritime battles to protect [INAUDIBLE] and so forth. There's a real attraction to going back to a major war.

But that attraction has always been there. And one of the reasons that the 2003 war turned out so badly for the United States is that it was imagined by [AUDIO OUT] It was imagined by the administration that carried it out as such a great war. And it was seen as a battle against a terrible tyranny with enormous forces and capable of great things on the battlefield in the United States. And it was therefore a worthy opponent for the United States.

And the administration, you recall, that George W. Bush administration, was very averse to approaching that war as one that would entail a long-lasting counterinsurgency, that would require the kinds of, as Roger was saying before, retail battles. Or, he didn't use that term, but there being dozens of small battles depending on local conditions. And not like the drive across France, Belgium, and Germany in 1944 and 1945, which is sort of how the administration preferred to think about the war.

And the Ukraine conflict, as I think Roger was also implying, is just going to reinforce that tendency. So maybe that's a lesson, too. But I'd just add something to this thought, which may be, I don't know, maybe a little controversial. But I think if I were a president who was interested in waging a big war under dubious circumstances, the 2003 war against Iraq would provide a really useful playbook for how to do this, getting the authorization for the use of military force, two back-to-back in a row, from Congress, spreading stories, linking my potential adversary or proposed adversary to really terrible things, despite the fact that one knew that linkage didn't really exist.

By promoting a new way of war that was extremely promising and guaranteed, a great and swift victory owing to new and fearsome weapons and tactics-- so there's a playbook there to the way that the George W. Bush administration approached the war that I would take quite seriously if I were in a similar situation as president in the future. So that's a negative lesson learned, or potentially a negative lesson learned, as I just throw that out there.

PETER KRAUSE: Thank you, Steve. So I'm going to turn now to questions from the audience. And I see a great question there from Barry Posen I'm going to come to in just a moment. I'm going to start by actually asking a question that hits on a theme from a number of different audience members. So I see Jerome Lockett's question, Deepak Tewari, et cetera, asking a lot of questions about legacy and how we think about this conflict and the aftermath of it, building on some of the points that Marsin and Roger and Steve just brought up.

So I actually want to turn to each of the panelists and ask, there's obviously a big debate going on right now, 20 years from the start of the war, about this issue of whether the conflict was, quote unquote, worth it. And I think in a broad sense, that's a tough question to ask, because as Steve mentioned at the outset, our former colleague John Tirman, Director of the Center for International Studies, wrote a book on the deaths of others, talking about the hundreds of thousands of Iraqis who died in this conflict, let alone the millions who were affected by it. And so, thinking in that broad sense, that's very difficult.

But it is important in the sense of thinking about US foreign policy or policies in general, to think about what is the outcome of this conflict? And you see different sides of it. Some people say, OK-- my colleague Dave Patel at the Crown Center for Middle East Studies said to me the other day, if you look at a country in terms of whether the government holds generally free and fair elections, peaceful transition of power among competing parties and individuals, you could argue Iraq is actually the most democratic country in the Arab world today, maybe alongside Lebanon, given the events that have been happening in Tunisia. And I think Marsin touched a little bit on this as well.

At the same time, this was obviously an incredibly deadly conflict that led to massive instability, unemployment and death in Iraq for generations. And it maybe didn't set it up to be the best country in terms of democracy. Actually, it may be very problematic in terms of people having good futures and stable lives. And so that, in addition to empowered Iran, rise of ISIS, these types of issues-- I mean, these are the things people are debating about the legacy of the conflict when we think about it.

So I'd love to just hear from the panelists in terms of how you think about this invasion and the war in terms of positive or negative legacy and outcome, and how we should think about this stuff before I turn to some more particular questions. So maybe Marsin, we could start with you, and then go to Roger.

MARSIN ALSHAMARY: Yeah, of course. I mean, I think you covered the essential themes that people talk about in terms of legacies of the war for an American audience. One of the great ironies of this war is that it was waged to fight terrorism, but if anything, it just created an incubator of terrorism in a country that hadn't actually been suffering from that problem prior to that. So terrorism in Iraq as opposed 2003 issue-- that particular kind of terrorism. Of course, there was state terrorism in Iraq far prior to 2003. But in terms of al-Qaeda and of ISIS and these things, were largely caused by 2003.

The other thing when it comes to US interests in the region, is that it really did empower the US's greatest rival in the region, Iran. And it's often said that Iran is the greatest winner of the 2003 war, in the sense that both its allies in Iraq, the political parties that have strong relations to it going back, were empowered by the 2003 war. But it was also able to exert influence throughout the country, not just with the Shi'a, with the Kurds as well.

And to this day, if you look at the Iraqi public and note their grievances about intervention, they're much more aggrieved by Iranian intervention than they are by American intervention. I think this has to do with the generational issues because Iranian intervention is something that they perceive in front of them in everyday life, whereas the US intervention is something of a memory that their parents may hold, but not necessarily them. But I think those two are the key issues that are of interest to an American audience.

For an Iraqi, there are so many legacies to this war. There is the government system we have in place right now. One that's not ever spoken of is the sense of exceptionalism and lack of agency that Iraq has since 2003, the idea that if anything were to go wrong in this country, the international community would jump to find a solution. In 2003, the international community or the US-led invasion toppled the dictator. And then they helped Iraq overcome the war with ISIS. And there's this constant idea among Iraqi political elite and amongst Iraqis that they are exceptional and that they will get this kind of intervention or this kind of support when necessary.

And you saw this in full force, by the way, in the 2021 elections when there was a huge demand for oversized UN participation and monitoring and observation of the Iraqi elections. I mean of course, Iraq needs observation and monitoring and technical assistance from the UN. But it's nowhere near as new to elections as many other countries that the UN has a very long or very deep role in. So this sense of exceptionalism is something that we haven't yet shed. And in the many legacies of the war, I think this is one that we don't talk of as much.

PETER KRAUSE: Roger, love to hear your thoughts.

ROGER PETERSEN: Yeah. Well, I mean, Steve laid out why the war was so bad for US interests. How do Iraqis actually perceive what went on? What's encouraging about being in Iraq last week is they don't sit around wallowing about the war. I think it's like I said, the sectarian part of this has moved on. Marsin's added it's about corruption, is the biggest issue. It's a dysfunctional state. But put this in context. Most states in the world are dysfunctional.

And part of this dysfunctionality has to do with the US being there. Part of the good-- the fact that Iraq is actually pretty high on political science democracy measures is probably not a bad thing. And a lot of Iraqis are like, well, you know, of course, the US came here. And they came to a country they didn't understand. And they screwed things up. But somebody told me last week in Iraq, if I had been sent to New Guinea to reform their society, I would have screwed it up, too. So they're sort of moving on.

Now, I want to-- one of the big things is, did the US impose a consociational system on Iraq in 2003? And this was a mistake by the United States. As you heard my talk, I think that this was probably a necessity in 2003. Consociationalism, for those of you in the audience, is a system that there's elite bargaining and every group gets a piece of the pie. And they get to veto the things that are really bad for their group.

Now, this reduces conflict between groups, is what was needed in 2003. But it tends to lead to inefficiency and corruption because every party is not working on meritocracy. They're just grabbing and capturing state resources and giving them out corruptly to their own people. The system in Iraq right now is called muhasasa system. And going down to all the jobs, they're all just divided by political parties. And they're not running well.

Now, it's true. The US imposed this consociational system. It's still around. And it's not efficient. But efficiency, there's still concerns among groups. The big question is whether to get out of this, you have to move to a majoritarian system or not, or you have to end consociationalism. There are countries which had consociational systems which ended. Netherlands was all based on there's conflict between Catholics, Protestants, and leftists. And those divisions became superseded by other cross-cutting ties. But it takes generations.

Iraq is maybe going towards a system which is not consociational, which is less corrupt. But they're not there yet. And the present prime minister is still doing a consociational system. It's still going to have tremendous inefficiency, if not outright corruption. This is going to go on. But at a certain point, it's not the fault that the US imposed it in 2003. It's that they have to deal with it themselves. And it's going to grow out of it themselves.

So I'm not sure if that answers your question. But that's, I think, one of the major questions is reforming the system, getting past this muhasasa system. And there's still not quite enough trust among groups to move past that.

PETER KRAUSE: Well, I think you and Marsin nicely talk a bit about the corruption issue, which Jeffrey Allen had asked about. But I want to turn to a question from Barry Posen. He says, "Is Iraq so fragile that its security and stability depends on an enduring us counterinsurgency mission versus ISIS across the border in Syria?" So as I mentioned before, as people on the audience may or may not know, the US still has a few thousand troops in Iraq. And so, asking is Iraq so fragile that this enduring US-coined mission is necessary? Open to any of the panelists to take a stab at that one.

STEVEN SIMON: I'll take a stab at it, Peter. Yes, we have about 2,500 troops in Iraq and about 900 in Syria. From CENTCOM's perspective, it's one unitary theater of operations, Syria and Iraq. And I think on the Syria issue, there's a sensitivity to the way in which the ISIS War in 2014 began in Iraq. I mean, it came from Syria. And I think there's a feeling, certainly in the command, that you need to have, in a sense, a forward defense in Syria against the reconstitution of ISIS.

And Syria is-- it's a more turbulent space than Iraq is right now. There's more of an opportunity for ISIS to come back and cross the border into Iraq and cause mayhem. Within Iraq, I think the feeling is, Iraq's got a lot of problems. Iraq shows a lot of promise as well, as both Marsin and Roger have pointed out. But if you look at the most recent World Bank report on Iraq, it's pretty dour and points to problems in Iraq's political economy that are potentially crippling. It makes for sober reading.

Anyway, the United States can't do anything about any of these big problems. And Marsin ran through them before, whether it's climate change or structural rigidities or what have you, or the problems associated with the muhasasa system that Roger described. The United States has no leverage there.

But all of these problems could ultimately create space for a revival of ISIS in Iraq. Well, the one thing that the United States can do anything about is help Iraq deal with an ISIS resurgence that might emerge owing to the various incapacities of the Iraqi system. So I think the point of view in Washington is, well, this thing is really cheap. It doesn't cost very much, not very many forces. I think the United States is going to draw down some forces in Iraq. One way or the other, they're not going to stay at 2,500 troops.

So the combined presence in Syria and Iraq is really minimal. The potential value is, in a sense, incalculable, not-- I don't use that word to mean immense. I just mean you can't calculate it in advance. So there's a feeling, well, you just do it. And it's also in Washington, too. There's a strong feeling, I think, that the force presence is important to maintain Gulf Arab confidence in US interests in the region. I don't know how seriously to take that, actually. But anyway, that's what they say.

PETER KRAUSE: Thank you, Steve. I'm just going to go to one final question before we close, for Marsin, actually, from Francis, asking about how young Iraqis feel about sectarianism. Are they more free of sectarianism than maybe a prior generation was? We'd love to get your thoughts before we close.

MARSIN ALSHAMARY: Yeah, absolutely. And cognizant of time, I'll tell you the short answer. One of the truly wonderful things about Iraq in the last five years is that, when we emerged from ISIS, I thought the country would go through a very difficult period of social rebuilding. But if anything, I've noticed that youth in Iraq are very deliberately antisectarian, to the point that when the majority Shi'a youth were protesting in 2019 and I interviewed many of them, and I asked them, how do you feel about your co-nationals in Sunni areas and Kurdish areas not joining you in these protest movements, they were very mature in their responses, saying that they understood why Sunnis wouldn't join them in protest, because of fears of being labeled ISIS sympathizers, and that they were with them in spirit, but they couldn't actually join them in person.

And this was a very mature response by very young people who have a million other things on their mind facing them in their everyday life. And I do think one of the things that gives me great hope in Iraq and in the political parties that will be formed by youth in the next 20 years is that Iraq has moved on as a society far past the sectarian framework.

PETER KRAUSE: Wonderful. Well, that's a hopeful note to end on, despite some of the challenges of the obvious issues we talked about here today. I want to thank the panelists so much for your wisdom. I want to thank everyone for attending. I want to thank the MIT Center for International Studies and the MIT Security Studies Program for sponsoring this Starr Forum. If you're interested in receiving information on future Starr Forums, check out the sign up link in the chat to get updates. Other than that, have a great day, and thank you again for joining us.

[MUSIC PLAYING]