[**The Iraq syndrome**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1743497/the-iraq-syndrome)

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IT has been common knowledge for more than 20 years that almost immediately after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the George W. Bush administration was desperately keen to deploy that atrocious tragedy as an argument for a military assault against Iraq. Reliable sources have only recently acknow­ledged that regime change in Baghdad was already an obsession with Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld and their neoconservative ilk well before 9/11 could be cited as an excuse.

Almost two-thirds of Americans were convinced on the eve of their nation’s bid to topple Saddam Hussein that this was necessary payback for the toppling of New York’s twin towers. Never mind that the intelligence agencies tasked with pinpointing a link between Iraq and the mainly Saudi terrorists and their Afghanistan/Pakistan-based sponsors had turned out to be a ‘mission: impossible’.

Another excuse was produced. Didn’t Saddam have nuclear ambitions, and would­n’t he share his weapons of mass destruction (WMD) with Al Qaeda? The US and British agencies, under pressure from their governments, relied on dubious sour­ces to compile dossiers of compelling nonsense. Saddam had in fact dismantled all such programmes after the 1991 war, but didn’t want his unfriendly neighbours to know.

Hans Blix and his UN inspectors couldn’t find anything not because WMDs had cleverly been concealed, but because they didn’t exist. And notwithstanding the UN performance that conclusively ruined Colin Powell’s reputation, would the US have gone ahead with its aggression had it seriously suspected that Saddam’s forces could decimate the invaders with WMD of the nuclear, chemical or biological variety?

Imperialist ambitions today are all about shock and awe.

When, predictably, no smoking gun — let alone the basis for a mushroom cloud — could be located even after the invasion, the reasoning turned to the well-tested tropes of liberating people from tyranny and blessing them with democracy. These gifts are still pending. Blame it on broken supply chains, perhaps?

Some of the soul-searching that has accompanied this week’s 20th anniversary of the conflict’s commencement regurgitates the tired untruth that either the main or the only problem lay with the failure of the invaders to come up with a coherent plan for the aftermath of the war. It isn’t incorrect to excoriate the absurd assumption that the pieces would all fall into place after the country had been blown to smithereens.

But a far bigger problem was the crime of unprovoked aggression. And it wouldn’t have made all that much difference even if Saddam’s WMDs had not been merely a sordid fantasy (which they were), or if a UN resolution had sanctioned the military action (which it didn’t).

Nor has the undoubtedly brutal nature of Saddam’s dictatorship been an argument clincher. After all, the same powers ranged against him in 2003 had a couple of decades earlier aided and encouraged his aggression against Iran. As had the Arab Gulf states that Iraq was threatening before and after his conquest of Kuwait. Redressing that misjudgement once it no longer served their interests led to regional consequences.

Following the evisceration of Iraq, there was little chance of putting it back together again, especially given the Western alliance’s choice of corrupt local allies. It just so happens that more than a few of them were also closely allied with Iran, which helps to explain why massive portraits of assassina­ted Revolutionary Guards Gen Qassem Sol­eimani can today be seen all across Baghdad.

Abu Ghraib and particularly Camp Bucca in Basra contributed meanwhile to the evolution of Al Qaeda in Iraq into the Islamic State group, which subsequently play­­ed a key role in the destruction of Syria, and even flowed into Libya after Muam­mar Qadha­fi’s fall courtesy of Nato’s intervention.

Almost the entire Middle East is a bloody mess today, thanks indirectly or otherwise to the warmongers in Washington. That obviously includes Yemen, where the Saudi-Emirati joint enterprise probably would not have been embarked upon without the aid and abetment of their friendly Western arms merchants.

The chief criminal in the multinational enterprise that sparked the first conflagrations of the 21st century was clearly the US, and some Americans now mourn the Iraq syndrome, much as they did the Vietnam syndrome a few years earlier, to lament the reluctance to wage war yet again on spurious grounds. There’s always a preferred alternative, though: proxy wars. This time it’s in Europe, unusually. But its nature is familiar, from both sides.

The last Iraq war, still not entirely over, established the template for imperial aggression in this century. In the unlikely event of Vladimir Putin being hauled up before the International Criminal Court, he should be sitting in the dock alongside Bush, Cheney, Tony Blair and a long line of their associates who were the architects of that obscene model.

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*Published in Dawn, March 22nd, 2023*