

Orientalism and the Liberation Narrative: Western Power and Post-2003 Iraq — A Critical Reading Through Edward Said's Theory

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Abstract

This study conducts a critical review of the connection of Orientalism, violence, and the post-2003 Iraq liberation narrative as is manifested through the theory of Orientalism by Edward Said. Beyond the political sphere, the analysis interrogates how the mechanisms of neo-imperialism, as Hardt and Negri theorize them, operated through economic restructuring and institutional replacement - to extend Western influence in post-invasion Iraq. Moreover, the liberation narrative fueled deep internal conflict within Iraqi society itself, producing a cleavage reaction that ranged from accepted out of sheer necessity among communities historically marginalized under the Ba'athist regime, to outright rejection among those who saw the invasion as just the latest chapter in a long history of foreign rule. This paper will apply Said's theory and the perspective on the Other to examine how the creation of the Iraq as the Other, backward, and requiring of saving, reinforced the interventions of violence and perpetuated the cycle of violence, both physical and ideological through the analysis of media, politics discourse, and the transformation of post-2003 Iraq. In conclusion, this paper demands a reconstructing of liberation and the need to de-colonize the narratives that enable the local agency and real Iraqi self-determination.

Keywords: Orientalism, Violence, Post-2003 Iraq, Liberation Narrative, Western Power, Cultural Imperialism

الاستشراق وسردية التحرير: السلطة الغربية والعراق ما بعد عام 2003 – قراءة نقدية في ضوء
نظرية إدوارد سعيد

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الملخص

تُجري هذه الدراسة مراجعة نقدية للعلاقة بين الاستشراق والعنف وسردية «تحرير العراق» بعد عام 2003، وذلك في ضوء نظرية الاستشراق التي طوّرها إدوارد سعيد. ولا يقتصر التحليل على المجال السياسي فحسب، بل يتناول أيضًا الكيفية التي عملت بها آليات الإمبريالية الجديدة، كما نظّر لها مايكل هاردي وأنطونيو نيغري، من خلال إعادة الهيكلة الاقتصادية واستبدال المؤسسات، بهدف توسيع النفوذ الغربي في العراق ما بعد الغزو، علاوة على ذلك، أسهمت سردية التحرير في تأجيج صراعات داخلية عميقة داخل المجتمع العراقي نفسه، مُحدثَةً انقسامًا حادًا في ردود الفعل؛ إذ تراوحت المواقف بين القبول بدافع الضرورة لدى بعض الفئات التي عانت التهميش تاريخيًا في ظل نظام البعث، والرفض القاطع لدى فئات أخرى رأت في الغزو مجرد حلقة جديدة في تاريخ طويل من الهيمنة والتدخل الأجنبي. توّظف هذه الورقة نظرية سعيد ومنظوره حول «الآخر» لتحليل الكيفية التي جرى من خلالها تمثيل العراق بوصفه «الآخر» المتخلف والعاجز والمحتاج إلى الإنقاذ، وكيف أسهم هذا التصوّر في تبرير التدخلات العنيفة

وإدامة دوائر العنف، سواء على المستوى المادي أم الأيديولوجي. ويتحقق ذلك من خلال تحليل الخطاب الإعلامي والسياسي، ودراسة التحولات التي شهدتها العراق بعد عام 2003. وتخلص الدراسة إلى ضرورة إعادة بناء مفهوم «التحرير» وإعادة النظر فيه نقدياً، فضلاً عن أهمية تفكيك السرديات الاستعمارية التي تُضفي الشرعية على التدخل الخارجي، بما يفسح المجال أمام الفاعلية المحلية ويعزز حق العراقيين في تقرير مصيرهم بصورة حقيقية ومستقلة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاستشراق، العنف، العراق بعد عام 2003، سردية التحرير، القوة الغربية، الإمبريالية الثقافية.

Introduction

The American invasion of Iraq that was commonly portrayed by the US and its allies as a form of liberation is a landmark in the history of not only Iraq but also the geopolitical shifts after 2003 in Iraq. As Khalidi (2004) argues, the regime of Saddam Hussein was presented by the western powers as a necessary intervention to help the country free itself of harsh rulers and bring freedom to its citizens. But this narrative of emancipation may overlook important cultural and political dimension. the actual culture and politics that have echoed in Iraq since. The invasion did not only cause destruction of infrastructure, but it also triggered a more widespread, more damaging process of cultural and political transformation, which was influenced mainly by the Western ideologies and Orientalist attitudes(Khalidi, 2004, pp. 102, 152).

The theory on Orientalism by Edward Said provides a critical perspective through which the invasion and the post in it can be analyzed. Said argues that the West constructed in the position of having created an image of the East as backward, exotic and in need of Western intervention can be a very insightful way in understanding how the war in Iraq was justified. The Western discourse of liberation portrayed Iraq as a nation that was unable to govern itself and therefore in need of Western guidance. These implications of this story were not merely political, but also very cultural with a long-lasting effect on the identity of Iraqi people. By creating Iraq as the Other, the West strengthened the dichotomy between the civilized West and the barbaric East, which created a justification of intervention, and, in most instances, continued to legitimizing form of intervention associated with violence. (Said, 1979, p. 15).

The rebuilding process, and the restoration of the stability process were eroded through the rapid collapse of the Iraqi military and the systematic dismantling of the state institutions that created vacuum that enabled the unchecked proliferation of militant forces. These activities, along with the inability to plan properly to govern the post-invasion situation, resulted in a power vacuum, and general chaos, which, according to some scholars, has been interrupted by some scholars as resulting from policy choices made by invading forces (Chomsky, 2003, p. 76).

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to trace how the liberation narrative surrounding the 2003 invasion of Iraq was

constructed and legitimized across political , media and academic discourse. Here CDA is used as a tool which is able to look beyond description to analyze the construction, maintenance and naturalization of relations of power through language and to consider narratives such as those of liberation, which are ideologically charged .

The analysis is grounded primarily in Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, while also drawing on Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's theory of neo- imperialism to account for the ideological and structural dimensions of Western intervention.

The corpus includes three types of documents: political speeches and official statements by leaders from the U.S. and the U.K. during the period 2002-2004; the mainstream media coverage of the invasion, mostly from CNN, The New York Times and The Guardian; and academic and policy documents from think tanks and scholarly institutions working on the Iraq issue. The texts were chosen based on two criteria: firstly, they directly address the subject of liberation, democracy and the portrayal of Iraq in the West, and secondly, the texts are significant institutions in the respective discursive field. Texts were selected for the director's engagement with the themes of liberation , democracy , and Western representations of Iraq , ensuring that the groups speak coherently to the study's central concern.

Materials were examined through close the textual reading and thematic interpretation, with particular attention paid to three recurring patterns. The construction of Iraq as the civilizational "Other," the discursive here justification of the military that intervention, and the legitimization of Western power through the language of liberation and democratization. To strengthen the reliability of the findings that the study triangulates as evidence across political , media , and academic sources . It allows convergence and contradictions between these discourses to surface. When discourses overlapped it was assumed that they were evidence of hegemonic consolidation and when they did not, the divergence itself was treated as analytically significant. The resulting of the analysis is read through a postcolonial lens and according the relationship between discourse , power , and violence at the central of the post -2003 Iraqi contexts .

Research Problem and Questions

This research seeks to interrogate the disconnect between the Western liberation narrative and the reality experienced by Iraqis following the 2003 invasion. Against this background, this study is guided by the following questions

- 1-How did the Western liberation narrative draw on Orientalist frameworks to justify the 2003 invasion of Iraq and its aftermath?
- 2-In what ways did the Orientalist framing of Iraq as the "Other" perpetuate ideological and cultural violence through media representation and political discourse in the post-invasion period?
- 3-How did Iraqi responses to the Western liberation narrative reflect competing claims over national identity and self-determination?

Theoretical Framework

Hegemony, on this account , is most powerful precisely when it has ceased to appear as power at all. The west had been telling this story before Bush or Blair were born , Said's theory of Orientalism adds the different dimension to this analysis. That image did not require invention in 2003. It had accumulated over centuries, deposited in Western literature, policy documents, and colonial administration, and it waited there to be activated, and 2003 was the moment . Bush and Blair did not generate the idea that Iraq needed saving , they inherited it, and they put it to work, the difference in 2003 was its deployment alongside direct military intervention .

Here, Gramscian hegemony and Saidian Orientalism converge. For hegemony to take root, it requires a narrative that masquerades as an organic truth rather than an external imposition - a requirement perfectly fulfilled by Orientalism. When Iraq was depicted as inherently incapable of self-governance, the assertion bypassed political scrutiny, registering instead as mere common sense. This captures Said's core thesis: Orientalism operates not through overt propaganda, but as a foundational assumption that renders military intervention structurally inevitable.

While Gramsci locates this inevitability within the vocabulary of liberation, Said traces its genealogy to the architecture of Western knowledge. This concept becomes vividly apparent in the fractured reception among Iraqis. Those who had survived the regime's brutality processed the promise of 'liberation' through a fundamentally different historical matrix than those whose collective memory was anchored in British mandates and Western-backed coups. This divergence is telling: the Orientalist framing was never designed to persuade an Iraqi audience that already understood how such stories end. Its true labor occurred elsewhere - within the metropolitan institutions and cultural assumptions that codified the invasion as the only rational choice

Literature Review

In *The Great War for Civilization : The Conquest of the Middle East* (2005), Robert Fisk provides another historical account of the prolonged conflicts in the region , focusing specifically on how the Western imperialism generated the

instability that defines Iraq today largely . Fisk also argues that Western intervention in Iraq, particularly after 2003, drew on an entrenched Orientalist discourse that positioned Iraqis as passive victims in need of saving, while systematically ignoring the realities of local politics and social organization altogether (Fisk, 2005, p. 197).

That narrative, Fisk contends , did not simply misrepresent Iraq , it actively created the conditions for the violence that followed the invasion . This study reads Fisk's account as evidence for a claim broader than his own , that the Orientalist discourse that he documents did not merely accompany but supplied its operating logic.

Chomsky concerned himself less with the narrative itself than on the interests it obscured . In *Hegemony or Survival* (2003), he argues that the moral case for invasion - freeing Iraq from dictatorship - functioned well enough as rhetoric , but the actual drivers were more straightforward : oil , regional control , and the projection of American power globally (Chomsky, 2003, p. 76). What connects Chomsky to Said is the mechanism rather than the conclusion itself . The liberation narrative only worked because Western discourse had already constructed Iraq as a place incapable of governing itself effectively. Intervention requires a prior condition — and that condition is helpless alone . Orientalism , in this reading, did not supply the justification for the invasion ; it supplied something more foundational: the assumption that made justification feel unnecessary altogether

Achcar's *The People Want* (2013) focuses on the Arab Spring, but one of its central arguments reaches further back historically . Achcar shows how Western intervention in the Arab world consistently relies on the same premise - that these societies are too volatile, too divided , and too culturally unsuited for self-governance independently . That premise, he argues, does not emerge as a reaction to events , it functions as a precondition for them instead (Achcar, 2013, p. 87). Iraq in 2003 did not represent an exception to this pattern - it represented the pattern itself precisely . The liberation narrative did not generate its own credibility from scratch ; it borrowed from decades of Western discourse that had already settled the question of what Arab societies were and what they supposedly require. When we read alongside Fisk and Chomsky, Achcar's argument suggests that the Iraqi case was not isolated of Orientalist but one instance of reusable script a point that this paper returns to when examining how the same discourse operated through the media and intellectual channels.

Murray and Scales bring a military historian's perspective to the same argument likewise . Their account of the invasion shows how planners approached Iraq not as a society with its own internal logic but as a problem requiring a solution - a territory assumed to be chaotic and therefore manageable through force (Murray & Scales, 2003, pp. 240–241). Allawi reaches a related conclusion from a different angle: Western frameworks like democracy and capitalism

never developed to make sense of Iraq's particular history, and importing them wholesale amounted less to an act of liberation than an act of replacement. Allawi, writing from inside the occupation, states the point more directly - the Americans never understood what they had walked into, and that ignorance shaped every decision that followed (Allawi, 2007, pp. 6–7).

Most existing literature concentrates on why the invasion happened – the strategic interests, the Orientalist assumptions, the failures of planning primarily . What it tends to leave out is the aftermath itself . Two decades of Western narrative about Iraq have shaped how the Iraqis understand themselves and their country, and that dimension for the problem remains largely unexamined today. What happens to the society that has spent years as the object of someone else's story ? The silence around that question is not incidental – it reflects a gap in the scholarship that this paper takes seriously. A narrative powerful enough to justify a war does not simply dissolve when the fighting stops; it continues to work on the people it was about, restructuring their relationship with their own history and identity long after the military operation ends formally.

Another era that the literature also tends to miss is the connection between Orientalist framing and the violence that followed the invasion altogether. Scholars have documented the insurgency and sectarian conflict in considerable detail , but few have asked whether the way Western discourse constructed Iraq. Whether Iraq's portrayal of a place requiring constant external management - actively generated the conditions for that violence to persist thereafter remains a largely unexplored question. The framing did not simply describe an unstable country ; it may have helped produce one instead.

The existing literature carries a blind spot on the other side as well. Treating the invasion as purely a Western imposition flattens the picture in ways that damage the analysis considerably. A significant portion of the Iraqi population wanted Saddam gone - not because Washington directed them to, but because they had lived under his regime and understood what that meant personally (Makiya, 1998, p. 58). It turns Iraqis into the objects of foreign choices, not political actors with their own motives, concerns and fears about the outcome which followed. All the coalition did was politically make a war out of that desire.

In Washington's hands, the Iraqis' desire for freedom from Saddam was no longer a goal to explore at leisure, but a justification to go to war (Ricks, 2006, p. 98). When the invasion ended and the occupation began, the gap opened quickly thereafter. The coalition never seriously built stable governance, and the promise of liberation did not survive contact with the actual priorities of the intervening powers (Diamond, 2005, p. 313). That gap was not a failure of execution , it was a consequence of what the liberation narrative had been : a framework designed to make intervention legible, not a political commitment, a political commitment with any obligation to deliver outcomes. Dismantling the Iraqi state without replacing it was not an oversight , it was a decision , and it fed directly into everything that followed: the sectarian violence , the power

vacuum , the years of instability (Allawi, 2007, p. 158). The question the literature rarely asks is whether the condition ever genially engaged with what Iraqi society actually looked like before deciding what that society needed .The evidence that suggests it did not , and that failure was not a miscalculation, it was the predictable result of the narrative that had already settled the answer before asking the question .What remains underexplored is the military dimension of this story. Both Said and Allawi cover the political and cultural logic of Orientalism , but less attention has gone to how that logic operated inside military planning itself - how commanders understood the terrain, the population, and the likely resistance . Packer's account gestures toward this gap (Packer, 2005, p. 75) , but the distance between the political narrative and the decisions made on the ground remains largely unexamined. That distance matters, because the Orientalist assumptions embedded in the political justification for the invasion did not stay in Washington - they travelled with the soldiers, and they shaped what these soldiers thought they were walking into . The literature also largely ignores the Iraqi side of this story. How did Iraqis honestly push back against the narratives others built about them? How did intellectuals, activists, and ordinary people contest the Western account of what their country was and what it needed? That resistance existed, and tracing it matters — not simply as a corrective to Western sources, but because it shows how a society rebuilds its national identity after someone else has spent years defining it from the outside. The same question extends beyond Iraq. Other countries in the region have faced versions of the same Orientalist framing, and their responses have not taken the same shape. Comparing those responses would produce a more precise argument than the literature currently makes - not simply that Orientalism has consequences, but which consequences, under which conditions, and through which mechanisms. This represent a more demanding analytical question that the existing scholarship has not yet seriously asked it.

The Relationship Between Orientalism and Violence

According to the theory proposed by Edward Said, the creation of the Other makes it possible to justify violence, as this perspective presents those who are considered as Other as requiring to be controlled or even saved by the West. What was portrayed as an attempt to dismantle a tyrannical dictatorship in Iraq under the banner of eliminating a barbaric ruler was actually supported by a larger Orientalist narrative that provide discursive justification for continued military in the name of imposing order upon perceived murders in a lawless state (Fisk, 2005, p. 793). The physical and cultural violence in Iraq is, therefore, evident to be a continuation of this Orientalist paradigm, which created Iraq as a region requiring Western rule and domination. Said's theory of Orientalism serves as the central framework of this paper , by offering a basis for analyzing representation of Iraq in the context of the post – 2003 liberation narrative. The study draws on Gramscian hegemony and Hardt and Negri's

notion of neo- imperialism as analytical tools for examining the cultural and economic dimension of these representation.

Besides the framework suggested by Said, the notion of cultural hegemony, proposed by Antonio Gramsci also adds to this analysis. Building on Said's analysis , Gramsci's framework reveals that the ruling elite does not just exert control over the governed by means of political or economic power but through the cultural assent of the dominant. The process of establishing cultural hegemony by the Western powers was possible in the case of Iraq, not only through the framing of the invasion as a benevolent mission but also through the silencing of local Iraqi voices. This was an extension of cultural dominance that was combined with the military force that contributed that the political and social systems of Iraq along models associated with Western governance (Gramsci, 1971, p. 263).

Moreover, the neo-imperialism concept, which researchers like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri developed, introduces one more dimension of the phenomenon. They suggest that in contemporary imperialism, rules are no longer applied in a territorial manner but through worldwide systems of control, in which economic and military influence is imposed indirectly through the use of multinational corporations, international organizations, and armed interventions (Hardt & Negri, 2000, pp. 31–32).

George W. Bush stood as the most visible architect of this narrative . Through the months that leading to the invasion , he returned again and again to the same vocabulary - freedom, democracy, human rights - and Tony Blair repeated him across the Atlantic with enough conviction to give the project the appearance of a transatlantic moral consensus . Khalidi documents precisely how this shift worked together : when the security-based arguments for war failed to win over the American public in sufficient numbers , the administration moved its emphasis , turning from the language of threat elimination toward a call to "liberate" and "democratize" Iraq - terminology deliberately chosen because it sounded more idealistic than the more direct phrase "regime change" that officials had originally used behind closed doors (Khalidi, 2004, p. 16). In a February 2003 speech at the American Enterprise Institute , Bush pushed further on this, framing Iraq as the first step in the democratic transformation of an entire region and declaring that a new Iraqi government would serve as "a dramatic and inspiring example of freedom for other nations in the region" (as cited in Khalidi, 2004, p. 42). That framing was rhetorically significant in that it shifted the terms of debates from the legitimacy of invasion to the apparent necessity of intervention.

The appeal drew on both emotion and something more calculated . The rhetoric of freedom landed on an American public raised on the idea that opposing dictatorship is self-evidently right, and in the immediate aftermath of September 11th, the language of liberation carried particular weight , meaning it gave a moral framework to a country that was looking for one . Chomsky's intervention

here as a deliberate dismantling of that framework, through all the shifting of justifications and pretexts , one principle remained constant - the United States needed to end up in effective control of Iraq , by operating under some facade of democracy if that proved feasible (Chomsky, 2003, p. 20) . The real background issue , as diplomats on all sides acknowledged , some critics argued that the strategic and economic consideration influenced by policy decisions (Chomsky, 2003, p. 20). The liberation narrative functioned , in this analysis less as a sincerely held conviction than as a strategic choice - the moral framing placed around a set of interests that the administration could not openly declare.

Said's analysis of Orientalism identifies the inherited foundation on which the narrative rested for centuries, Western discourse built the East as backward and incapable of self-governance , a region that almost by definition , needed Western intervention to restore order (Said, 1979, p. 3). That construction did not need inventing in 2003. It had grown across generations , settling into literature , policy documents and colonial administration and it sat there ready to be activated . When Bush and Blair described Iraq as a country unable to govern itself and in desperate need of western guidance , they reached not for a new idea , they pulled one that already existed, already felt natural, already operated as what Said calls Orientalism's "flexible positional superiority" : a framework that places the Westerner in a whole series of relationships with the Orient without losing the relative upper hand (Said, 1979, p. 7). This study suggests that Orientalism, in Said's account , holds its durability because it refuses to present itself as ideology , it moves through culture as common sense (Said, 1979, p. 7).

The narrative here rested on a structure that serious examination would have collapsed . It flattened an enormously complex country - with deep sectarian and ethnic divisions, a long history of both resilience and trauma, and a population whose relationship to the Ba'athist regime varied enormously - into a clean story of oppressor and oppressed, hero and victim , civilization and barbarism. What the narrative excluded was everything that did not fit: the absence of any coherent plan for what came after the regime fell, the ways in which dismantling the state would destabilize the country for years , and the interests – geopolitical , economic , strategic - that drove the invasion may also have been influenced by strategic , economic , and geopolitical consideration . This exclusion is structural rather than incidental - a narrative that depends on simplification does not merely leave gaps , it does not merely leave off the questions that most need answers before the first bomb falls

This model is essential to explain how the Iraq invasion is a part of a greater trend, the trajectory of global interventions, where the actual reasons tend to be the endeavor at achieving economic and geopolitical dominance, disguised in the rhetoric of humanitarian intervention. This paper interrogates how the liberation narrative may be examined as a discourse that facilitated particular forms of Western influence in post – 2003 Iraq. In doing so , it situated the Iraqi

case with border patterns of global power and imperialism that continue to shape Western intervention across the Middle East and beyond .

Media Portrayals

Western media did not simply report on the 2003 invasion , it actively shaped the terms according to which the public understood it . By coverage of Saddam Hussein's regime occupied the center of this media operation Journalists and commentators returned repeatedly to the regime's most documented abuses - the use of chemical weapons against Kurdish people at Halabja , the apparatus of the secret police , the mass graves - in ways that functioned less as historical contextualization than as rhetorical preparation for military. These were documented crimes, and their historical reality requires no qualification. What the analysis needs to examine and discuss , however, is their timing and framing . By presenting consistently in the months leading to the invasion , they supplied the effective infrastructure the liberation narrative required , positioning the question of military intervention as inseparable from the question of how to respond to a regime with this record.

Khalidi identifies how this operated across Western public discourse (Khalidi, 2004, p. 16) . The repeated association of Saddam's documented record with the necessity of American military intervention produced a rhetorical structure in which opposition to the war became difficult to articulate without appearing to minimize the regime's conduct . That structure warrants analytical attention precisely because it did not depend on fabrication – it operated through selection and emphasis. The analytically relevant question is not whether the documented crimes were real , but which institutional and political actors determined when they entered public consciousness , through which channels and toward which ends . Saddam Hussein's statue coming down in Firdaus Square on April 9 , 2003 became the central image through which Western media organized the invasion's meaning .

Allawi, writing from close observation of the occupation's dynamics , notes that the crowd's response to the statue's removal appeared "stilted and stage-managed," while genuine public expressions of relief were more localized and considerably more ambiguous than the footage indicated (Allawi, 2007, p. 134). The square held a small crowd rather than a mass gathering of people , American military vehicles surrounded the area , and Marines briefly placed an American flag over the statue's face before an Iraqi flag replaced it . These concepts do not reach mainstream audiences , and their absence shaped how the event entered the public understanding as evidence for the liberation narrative. This concealment reflected the structural conditions under which the coverage operated. Embedded journalism - the practice of assigning reporters to travel and live with military units , it introduced a systematic perspective into war reporting. The producing coverage humanized soldiers and oriented itself , by design toward the military's account of events .

Khalidi describes the result as "pathetic servility toward the Bush administration over Iraq" (Khalidi, 2004, p. 11) , he argued that media organizations had positioned themselves to observe the war from inside the intervention rather than from the perspective of the country the intervention targeted. The issue, in analytical terms, was not individual bias but institutional positioning. What this coverage largely excluded was the diversity and complexity of Iraqi reactions to the invasion. The occupation's early weeks produced not a unified response but a fractured, anxious, and in many places deeply ambivalent one. Allawi in his analysis observes that the onlookers who encountered Coalition forces in the initial days "seemed perplexed and anxious, unsure of how the overthrow of the government would affect them" (Allawi, 2007, p. 133). This analytical point here is not that the coverage misrepresented Iraqi sentiment deliberately, but that the frameworks it operated within made certain representations available and others structurally difficult to produce .

In this matter , Marr argues consistently that the post-invasion fragmentation did not represent a resurgence of primordial ethnic conflict , it resulted from specific political decisions : the dissolution of state institutions , the deliberate exclusion of the certain communities from the new political order, and the creation of a power vacuum that competing actors moved quickly to fill (Marr, 2012, p. 257). That analysis found little space in mainstream Western media coverage , where the account of post-invasion Iraq retained the same basic structure it had carried from the beginning - a story that outsiders told about a place they had already decided they understood

Intellectual and Academic Discourse

The liberation narrative did not sustain itself on political rhetoric alone . It drew on a parallel infrastructure of think tanks , policy institutes, and academic literature that had spent years constructing a framework in which military intervention in Iraq appeared not merely justified but merely justified but intellectually necessary. Allawi, in his writing from direct experience of the occupation, documents the analytical limitations at the heart of his enterprise with considerable precision . The academics and researchers who gathered around Washington think tanks and the vice president's office, and who had made Iraq a central focus of their work, operated with what Allawi describes as a fundamental misunderstanding of Iraqi society constrained by ideological certainties that left little room for the country's actual complexity (Allawi, 2007, pp. 7–8). The limitation, Allawi argues, was not incidental but structural: each strand of American thinking that contributed to the basis for the invention developed in isolation from any direct or substantive engagement with Iraq itself (Allawi, 2007, p. 8). What the think tanks generated was not knowledge about Iraq but a pre-formed ideological framework into which Iraq fit - one that took intervention as its forgone and furnished the vocabulary to reach it

Wolfowitz, serving as Deputy Secretary of Defense and the most prominent intellectual architect of the war, illustrates this dynamic. He maintained that

advancing democracy and embedding liberal values across the Middle East aligned with American strategic interests, and he gathered around him in the Pentagon a group that shared this orientation (Allawi, 2007, p. 83). The policy community often approached Iraq through a border theoretical framework rather than sustained engagement with Iraqi realities and once that framework secured acceptance, the invasion came to be presented less as a political choice than as the application of established expertise.

The democracy promotion on discourse was not confined to Washington's right-wing policy circles. Mainstream scholars of democratization had spent decades building a body of literature on the conditions required for stable democratic governance, and the invasion's architects drew on particular elements of this scholarship to provide the project with academic legitimacy. Diamond, one of the world's leading democracy scholars and himself recruited to advise the Coalition Provisional Authority, had warned before the invasion that the task was enormous and the odds were long — that democratic transformation would require a prolonged, internationalized, and carefully resourced engagement (Diamond, 2005, p. 19). In the Middle East in 2003, there were only two democracies among nineteen states, and neither Turkey nor Israel was capable of serving as a model for Iraqi democratization; sixteen Arab states constituted the only major cultural and regional group in the world without a single democratic government, and three of Iraq's neighbors could be expected to actively work against any democratic process (Diamond, 2005, p. 21). That context, which featured prominently in much of the democratization literature that was largely absent from the public intellectual case for the invasion.

The post-September 11 intellectual climate added another dimension to the case for intervention. The widespread belief that suicide terrorism derived primarily from Islamic fundamentalism, rather than from the specific political grievances including foreign military occupation, encouraged the view that transforming Muslim societies through external force carried strategic necessity. Pape's analysis of suicide terrorism contests this assumption directly, arguing that it contributed to public support for the Iraq invasion by linking anti-American violence to general feature of Muslim societies rather than to specific political conditions (Pape, 2005, p. 1). A contested analytical framework, in other words, entered the intellectual foundation for military intervention, shaping conclusions that appeared widely accepted despite being supported by contested evidence.

A Society Cleaved: Iraqi Responses to the 2003 Invasion

When American forces entered Iraq in March 2003, they entered a society that decades of Ba'athist rule, sectarian policies, and state-sponsored coercion had profoundly shaped. The deepest fracture lines running through that society played a major role in shaping how different communities received the invasion. What followed did not take the form of a unified Iraqi response to the foreign intervention. It took the form of a country dividing along historical lines that the

invasion had not produced but had contributed to intensifying - existing tensions that the removal of the Ba'athist state's coercive order made more visible.

The division , broadly speaking , ran between those for whom the fall of Saddam Hussein represented a significant political opening and those for whom it represented another episode in a longer history of external intervention. This is of course that scholars have long wrestled with Dawisha, writing from direct familiarity with Iraqi society, argues that the narrative of a fractured Iraq did not originate with the invasion - it traces back to the basics of the Iraqi state itself and the argument here becomes particularly , rooted in challenging of accommodating an ethnically and confession ally diverse population that colonial state-building had assembled within a single territorial framework without producing genuine political cohesion (Dawisha, 2009, p. 4). It is worth noting that the invasion , on this reading did not produce this kind of division. Rather - it removed the coercive political order that had contained them, and their re-emergence reflected the unsolved issues that the Ba'athist state had contained rather than resolved it.

For Iraq's Shia – majority population as well as for its northern Kurdish populations , the collapse of the previous Ba'athist government provided a politically open environment that had been closed to this community for generations.

Haddad argues that the U.S, led against Saddam Hussein removed the pre - existing balance of power and provided the opportunity to questions how the state in Iraq and society should be developed - and thus provide in the incentive to engage in identity based the conflict as initiate an intensely violent struggle over the definition of Iraq itself (Haddad, 2016, p. 3) . The acceptance of the invasion among these communities did not reflect trust in Washington's stated intentions. It reflected the calculation of communities that had survived chemical attacks, mass graves, and enforced disappearances, and that understood what the continuation of the previous political order would have continued to be demanded of them.

The political response from Sunni logic entirely. Unlike Iraq's Shia parties and Kurdish movements, which entered the post-2003 period with established organizations and defined political objectives, Sunni political forces lacked a comparable institutional foundation. In analyzing this kind of shifting , Haddad identifies behind the Sunni rejection a convergence of alienation, loss, and a sense of collective victimhood that the regime change of 2003 initiated - a position that generated not political competition but a profound crisis of collective identity (Haddad, 2016, p. 5). Ba'athification policies , implemented by the Coalition Provisional Authority and military structures through which Sunni communities had historically exercised political influence. Dodge documents how the dissolution of the Iraqi military left hundreds of thousands of armed men without income or institutional affiliation - a decision whose

consequences fed directly into the insurgency that followed, with a speed that the policy's architects do not appear to have anticipated (Dodge, 2013, p. 167).

The fact that both parties were internally disunited contributed significantly to the difficulties associated with managing this rupture . As Dagher reports based on survey research conducted in Baghdad immediately after the invasion by Gallup International's Iraqi affiliate organization, IIACSS; opinions regarding the impact of the collapse of Saddam Hussein were virtually equally split - 49% of respondents perceived the collapse of Saddam as having positively affected their personal lives while 47% perceived it as negatively affecting them. This nearly equal divide at the city-level indicated something the Western liberation narrative had no analytical apparatus to account for: the same event was being interpreted in radically different ways by persons residing in the same urban environment (Dagher, 2023, p. 2). Machlis demonstrates that the dichotomous framing that dominated this period - loyalists versus resisters - consistently obscured the more complex reality of communities navigating a new political order they had not chosen and could not straightforwardly refuse (Machlis, 2022, p. 44).

To be able to maintain coherency, the Western liberation narrative relied upon a unified, and largely receptive Iraqi populace. What really existed was a society where the meaning of the invasion continued to be clearly and irrevocably disputed -not due to communication breakdowns or failures in implementing plans, but as a predictable result of intervening in a nation whose internal political structure the intervening nations never seriously investigated prior to taking action.

Conclusion

The liberation narrative that framed the 2003 invasion of Iraq functioned as more than political justification; it operated as an epistemological project. This observation carries significant implications , by constructing Iraq as the Other, as a society incapable of self-governance in the eyes of those who had already decided to , and requiring Western guidance to achieve political order, the invading powers drew on an established discursive tradition that did not appear from nowhere but rather than simultaneously shaped and reinforced their authority over it. This paper has argued that the violence may be understood in relation to assumption embedded within that narrative . It developed from within the narrative's own structural logic as outcomes were made more likely by the structural assumptions underlying the intervention , as the plausible consequence of an intervention that understood the country it entered primarily through the frameworks it had inherited and never truly questioned , rather than through sustained engagement with Iraq's actual conditions.

Iraqi responses to this political imposition were neither uniform nor passive , and that complexity is precisely what the liberation narrative did not readily accommodate. Communities that the Ba'athist order had historically marginalized approached the invasion through a fundamentally different

historical framework – one shaped by exclusion and survival - those whose primary reference point was the longer pattern of Western interference in the region. That division alone highlights a potential limitation in projects that rely on broad representations of social groups and exposes a structural vulnerability at the center of any hegemonic project that depends on constructing a unified Other where such unity may not fully exist in practice. Iraqi intellectuals, writers, and political figures did not limit their contestation to military resistance and this is a point has received comparatively less attention in some accounts of the - they challenged the narrative itself, advancing an account of Iraq defined by its own historical experience, its own internal complexity, its own contradictions and negotiations and its own capacity for political self-determination.

Said's framework drives the analysis of this paper , and it does powerful work , it explains how the Western discourse flattened Iraq into a homogenized for "Other". But the framework has a blind spot, and this analysis hasn't fully escaped it either. Here the central idea : in tracing how that construction works , the analysis can end up reproducing its logic. Moments for the Iraqi agency surface in the evidence, but they get treated as exceptions - quickly folded back into the dominant narrative instead of standing as pressure points that could push the framework itself further. Orientalism, in other words, can close in on itself. Said's theory still sees what most frameworks miss the architecture more than almost anything else available. But it needs help. Iraqi actors brought internal diversity, political contestation, and historical particularity to their own conditions - and that material deserves treatment as analysis in its own right, not as a footnote to someone else's story.

What this paper suggests that the gap between what the liberation narrative promised and what the invasion produced does not represent a failure of execution. It can be understood as reflecting aspects of the narrative's internal logic. A framework designed to make intervention legible - to render a foreign military operation as a benevolent act of rescue may have been limited in its ability to engage fully with the society that it sought to assist. The question Iraq raises is whether any intervention premised on the construction of the Other can produce genuine liberation, or whether it may contribute to the persistence of forms of dominance it sought to address .This paper has argued that the findings of this study suggest that the two may be difficult to reconcile. Liberation imposed from outside, through the epistemological logic of Orientalism appears to involve a significant tension : it requires constructing the target society as incapable of self-determination in order to justify the intervention, and that construction may constrain an important condition - political agency , that genuine liberation would require. Iraq remains, in the early twenty-first century, one of the most extensively documented examples of their consequences .

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