

Summary of the Iraq War for America

The official ending of the war in Iraq on 15 December 2011 and the withdrawal of the American troops was not a moment of triumph for the US Army. Neither was it for the USA's position and status in the world. The operation, which began in March 2003, turned out to be a tragic failure for America, the consequences of which can be seen within various planes and dimensions. The direct costs were dramatic: 4.5 thousand American soldiers lost their lives in Iraq, more than 32 thousand were injured and more than 150 thousand Iraqis were killed. The costs of the military operation exceeded 800 billion dollars. If additional expenses are included, the total cost is supposed to reach almost 2 trillion dollars. This enormous price that America paid could have been justified if the Americans had left Iraq with the sense of completing their mission and reaching the goal which guided the authors of the operation. This was, however, not the case.

It would not be an exaggeration to say, that the intervention in Iraq was one of the biggest errors of the Bush administration. It exposed its incompetence and excessive "wishful thinking". Certain motives for the attack on Iraq can be considered justified, such as the willingness to finally end Saddam Hussein's regime. Apart from that there were premises – including the neutralization of the weapons of mass destruction or the connection between Saddam and Al-Qaeda – which turned out to be completely empty. This undermined the USA's credibility as well as the professionalism of its intelligence services and the honesty of its politicians. Also its reputation of a superpower got seriously strained. Iraq turned out to have been a great, poorly justified, expensive and lousily performed fuss.

No. 75/ 2012
16'01'12

Institute for Western Affairs
Poznań

Author:
Jadwiga Kiwerska

Editorial Board:
Marta Götz
Piotr Cichocki
Radosław Grodzki
Krzysztof Malinowski

Even though president Bush officially ended operation “Iraqi Freedom” on 1 May 2003, the 8-year process of overcoming chaos, reestablishing stability and building democracy, still without perspective for a happy ending – the withdrawing Americans left behind just shreds of rickety democracy – showed how unprepared, inefficient and short-sighted the Americans were when they were beginning the Iraqi fuss. Instead of carrying out the Wilsonian mission and spreading the American message of peace and democracy, they turned the territory of Iraq into a place ravaged by terrorism, civil war and thuggery. A superpower with unprecedented military power was losing millions of dollars, hundreds of soldiers and its prestige. The analogy with Vietnam comes to mind, especially as another tragic and traumatic experience of America.

Also the main goal in Iraq – the victory of democracy radiating all over the Middle East and leading to lasting peace in the region (also in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict), turned out to be an unreal daydream of neoconservatists, an expression of their uncontrollable ambition. They found out for themselves that there is a fundamental discrepancy between the noble concepts of promoting democracy, freedom and wealth, and the harsh reality and specifics of actual predispositions, which must be scrupulously analyzed beforehand. The more spiteful commentator might say that all this should have been predicted, since some European partners pointed out to such threats. The White House did not listen, did not predict and did not plan well. But the price had to be paid not only by those high officials from the White House, but also by the American state, which turned out to be incapable of meeting its strategic goals. Can there be anything more distressing for a superpower?

It is difficult not to mention the international consequences related to the operation in Iraq. It was being performed in the atmosphere of great disturbance within the international arena and a diplomatic shock in the transatlantic system. Not being able to transfer its domination into efficient diplomatic actions and the creation of international consensus, the USA attacked Iraq in solitude, to a certain degree. Even though they had the support of, among others, the Great Britain, the governments of Australia, Italy, Spain, Denmark, the majority of East European countries and various more exotic ones (e.g. Republic of the Marshall Islands, Micronesia), they could not count on Germany, France, Russia, the Arab countries and the great majority of the public opinion in Europe and around the world. They did not have the consent of the UN or the support of NATO. The situation was completely different from the one in 1991, when George Bush senior attacked Iraq to liberate Kuwait, standing at the front of a great coalition, with the support of the UN and NATO. This time when America decided to go to war, it was criticized by some of its partners, generated objections all over the world and caused divisions among its previous



allies. With time, it lost even those that initially supported the invasion (Spain). “Once the premier practitioners of global diplomacy, we have behaved as amateurs” – said Madeleine Albright, Secretary of the State during the Clinton administration.

At the beginning of the intervention the power of America caused fear and concern in Iraq, but also inspired respect. However, after several years of limited success, the prestige of this country dropped in the region and its military efficiency has not been undisputed ever since. The superpower did not succeed in Iraq, where it experienced military, political and moral failures (the scandal related to the treatment of prisoners in Abu Ghraib). The mission in Iraq, instead of improving and strengthening the status of America in the world, it led to the denting and questioning of the American primacy. It also served as an unpleasant verification of the “Bush doctrine”, which was, to be honest, a complete failure in Iraq.

Also another important asset of the United States, influencing its rank and role in the world, was questioned. Namely its moral attributes of a model developed country, the rules and values setting high standards in the democratic world. It was that soft power that traditionally decided about the potency of the American influence around the world. But cases such as Abu Ghraib or the indefinite detention of prisoners without trial in Guantanamo meant that certain rules were broken and certain standards of a democratic country were abandoned. For the international public opinion, especially in Europe, this was not acceptable, even taking into consideration the extraordinary situation and special type of prisoners (terrorists), as well as the excessively harsh criticism of organizations selectively fighting for human rights.

So weren't those who considered the Americans to be hypocritical with respect to human rights and the rule of law correct in such a situation? In any case, the USA lost much of its attractiveness and decency, or at least it exposed itself to criticism in the sphere which had previously been its important asset and entitled it to formulate or even enforce appropriate norms and rules of conduct.

There is no doubt that the war in Iraq, especially its international context and the prolonging process of building stability in this country, which required enormous expenses and claimed many casualties, resulted in a great depreciation of the USA's role in the world and the loss of faith in the competence of American strategists. Discussions also arose about the isolation of America. But this aversion could not have been explained merely by the fact that it is rich and powerful. The decision of the Bush administration to act decidedly, firmly and without compromise in the face of danger, regardless of formal restrictions and the lack of wide international support, but with the use of unprecedented military force – instead



of a success in overcoming threats – led to the escalation of terrorism and chaos in different parts of the world. Instead of the improvement and strengthening of the American rank in the world – it caused the impairment and questioning of its credibility. Finally, it provoked attempts to isolate the United States from the international arena or even to gang up on it.

President Barack Obama tried to reverse these unfavorable tendencies. He tried to rebuild the strained image of the USA and bring back the value of soft power, importance of negotiations and consultations in foreign policy. However, “after Iraq” it became a fact that America is not able to influence the international state of affairs as previously. It is no longer all-powerful and ceased to be a leader capable of imposing its opinions and solutions, even by force.

This Publication is financed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education and the Society of the Institute for Western Affairs.

