Today's US-Iran Crisis Is Rooted in the Decision to Invade Iraq

President Trump's actions in the Middle East are, in part, consequences of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq.

The ramifications of the illegal, unnecessary and predictably tragic U.S. decision to invade Iraq are still with us. This includes the ongoing crisis with Iran, which brought us perilously close to all-out war in early January, resulted in the tragic downing of a civilian airliner and remains in a hair-trigger situation.

Those of us who opposed the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq raised questions regarding the Bush administration's false alarmist claims about Iraqi weapons, weapons programs and weapons systems. But our opposition went further: We observed how a U.S. invasion and occupation would likely lead to increased Salafist extremism among the country's Sunni population, a rise of terrorist groups, sectarian conflict and increased Iranian influence. Ironically, these predictable results were then used as an excuse for why the United States had to keep troops in Iraq for nearly nine years.

It was not "ancient hatreds" that spawned the sectarian conflict which engulfed Iraq and led to heavy Iranian influence in the country, but misguided U.S. policy. The U.S. decision to abolish the Iraqi Army and fire the majority of Iraqi government workers effectively destroyed the two major bastions of Iraqi secular national identity. The new Iraqi armed forces were built out of sectarian Shia militias (some, though not all, aligned with Iran), which the U.S. believed would be more effective in fighting Ba'athists, Sunni tribesmen, Salafist groups and others opposing the U.S. occupation. Iraqi government ministries, meanwhile, became the fiefdoms of various sectarian Shia political parties. The result was a bloody sectarian conflict, peaking in the 2006-2008 period, resulting in tens of thousands of deaths, primarily civilians.

Even when the sectarian violence subsided, the corrupt and repressive U.S.-backed Iraqi government so alienated much of the Sunni Arab population that ISIS, which was a direct outgrowth of the U.S. occupation, was able to suddenly seize large sections of northwestern Iraq in 2014. In response, U.S. troops returned to fight them, while the United States provided direct air support for Kataib Hezbollah and other militia on the ground. These Iranian-backed groups proved to be far more effective than the U.S.-trained Iraqi army in fighting ISIS. They also proved to be notoriously ruthless, targeting Sunni civilians as well as ISIS fighters while U.S.-led airstrikes killed thousands of additional civilians.

Even though a number of these Shia militias are more loyal to Iran's clerical leaders than they are to Iraq, they are sanctioned by the Iraqi regime and are therefore technically part of the Iraqi armed forces. This is why the U.S. airstrikes on five Kataib Hezbollah bases on December 30 created such a crisis. Bombing a branch of the armed forces of an ostensible ally without permission or even warning understandably created a backlash, not just among partisans of these militias, but ordinary Iraqis as well. Ironically, this came at a time when popular resentment against these militias — which have been implicated in sniper

attacks against both Sunni and Shia Iraqis protesting endemic government corruption and human rights abuses — was growing.

The biggest division among Iraqi Arabs is not between Sunnis and Shia, but between sectarians and nationalists in both communities. The hundreds of thousands of young people from both communities who have been protesting the sectarian Shia government in recent months — like their counterparts holding similar protests in Lebanon — are disgusted by the sectarian politics which have put archaic parochial interests above those of the nation, largely at their expense. Meanwhile, both the Americans and Iranians have been backing the increasingly unpopular regime in Baghdad. Not surprisingly, most Iraqis want both the United States and the Iranians out.

The Iraqi parliament, along with Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi, has formally called for the United States to remove its forces. Trump, however, has not only said *no*, but has refused to even consider negotiating the possibility. This is a clear violation of Iraqi sovereignty. Having foreign forces within a country's international border against the wishes of the host government and without a treaty commitment allowing them to be there is in effect a foreign military occupation and would give the Iraqis the legal right to use military force against them.

Trump's refusal to consider a withdrawal is not surprising, however. Republicans, along with some leading Democrats and prominent media pundits, insisted that President Obama should have kept U.S. troops in Iraq beyond the 2011 deadline by which President Bush and the Iraqi government had agreed at the end of 2008 to complete the withdrawal. Had Obama kept the troops in the country regardless, it would have been illegal. Obama was roundly criticized for his insistence on living up to the agreement and international law. It will be interesting to see how Congress and the media react to Trump's defiance in the coming days and weeks.

Now, the Trump administration is justifying its push towards an armed confrontation with Iraq on the charge that "Iran has killed hundreds of Americans." These claims — which have been repeated by much of the mainstream media and even by Democratic politicians who oppose Trump's provocative actions — are somewhat dubious, however. Though these Iranian-backed groups, led by Qassim Suleimani, are responsible for the deaths of countless numbers of Iraqis, Syrians and others, their responsibility for "hundreds" of American deaths is thus far unproven. They appear to be based on charges made by the Bush administration back in 2007 and were criticized at that time for the lack of credible evidence. The National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq, compiled by 16 U.S. intelligence agencies and issued in February of that year, did not indicate any significant Iranian role in Iraq's violence and instability. Almost all U.S. deaths in the counter-insurgency war came from Ba'athist, Sunni and independent Shia groups, not those backed by Iran.

Meanwhile, bipartisan support for assassinations of alleged terrorists and their supporters has also made it difficult to challenge Trump's killing of Suleimani. Such attacks actually increased under the Obama administration. And Joe Biden, for example, not only stated that Suleimani "deserved to be brought to justice for his crimes against American troops and thousands of innocents throughout the region," but his support for assassinations, even when the targets are nonviolent activists, goes back as far as the 1990s.

Quite simply, if the United States was really concerned about instability in the region, the rise of groups like ISIS, or Iran playing a major role in Iraqi politics, we should have never invaded Iraq in the first place. It fits a longstanding pattern in U.S. foreign policy of engaging in illegal and unnecessary foreign military interventions that create a series of crises that are then utilized to justify further foreign military intervention. Along the way, those of us who caution against such intervention — including scholars, foreign service officers, and others with expertise in the region in question, who are aware of the consequences — are marginalized in the discussion.

For example, when [Biden](#) chaired the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he only allowed for a day and a half of hearings on Iraq and stacked the witness list with supporters of an invasion, including those who insisted American occupation troops would be welcomed as liberators. He refused to include a number of prominent Middle East scholars and State Department veterans who had asked to testify and would have warned of the likely consequences of an invasion and occupation. Despite [recent claims to the contrary](#) on the campaign trail, he [supported the decision to invade Iraq](#) even after the weapons inspectors returned, and continued to defend the decision to invade even after he acknowledged Iraq didn't actually have the "weapons of mass destruction" he had claimed.

Though underground ISIS cells remain in Iraq, as they do in a number of other countries, they no longer control any Iraqi territory, so the presence of thousands of U.S. troops would appear to no longer have a strategic rationale. It is their continued presence that makes them vulnerable to attacks by Iranian-backed militias and others. Therefore, if Trump was really concerned about protecting American lives, the logical solution would be to withdraw.

The decision by the Trump administration to keep U.S. troops in Iraq despite the wishes of the Iraqi government and the Iraqi people greatly enhances the risk of war and exacerbates the horrific consequence of the 2003 invasion. In a sense, the passengers and crew of the Ukrainian International Airlines flight are also victims of the U.S. decision to invade Iraq. If the United States had not invaded, there would have been no threat of a U.S. air strike on Iran that prompted the accidental missile firing because there would have been no U.S. bases or pro-Iranian militias in Iraq which led to the recent conflict.

While many leading Democrats have expressed opposition to Trump's bellicosity, they are [doing little to actually stop it](#). The leadership in the Democrat-controlled House stripped two amendments from the recently passed National Defense Authorization Act, which would have blocked funding for war with Iran without congressional approval and repealed the 2001 war authorization against al-Qaeda and its supporters, which successive administrations have used to legitimize almost all U.S. military activity in the greater Middle East.

While Trump's impetuous actions (and disregard for legal limits to his actions based on both the Constitution and the UN Charter) make him uniquely dangerous, his bellicose policies towards Iran are, in many respects, a logical extension of bipartisan hyper-militarism exemplified by the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Just as decisions by British and French imperialists at the Paris Peace Conference a little over a century ago sowed the seeds of many of the conflicts plaguing the Middle East ever since, the U.S. war on Iraq may prove to be as least as tragic for at least as long.