

Why Iraq Is Much Worse Than 'Trump's Benghazi'

"The anti-Benghazi!" President Donald Trump replied after liberals referred to the [storming of the U.S. embassy](#) in Baghdad as his Benghazi, referencing the assault on the American consulate in Libya under the previous administration. Trump, supporters maintained, did not hesitate to repel the attack. In fact, in breaking news Wednesday night it was reported that the U.S. military, at the direction of President Trump, [killed the leader of the Iranian Quds Force](#), General Qassem Soleimani, in an airstrike at Baghdad's international airport.

The United States has a right to defend its embassies and military bases overseas as well as the duty to protect Americans and other personnel. But the partisan finger-pointers are overlooking the real significance of Benghazi: it was the symbol of a failed military intervention for which Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton bore greater culpability than the grisly murder of Ambassador Chris Stevens and his colleagues. The regime change war Washington launched left Libya teeming with terrorists, full of territory that was chaotic, violent and unsafe.

So too the war in Iraq, which initially created a power vacuum that empowered radicals who resemble the militant forces that attacked America on 9/11. In recent years, our focus has been on fighting ISIS rather than nation-building. But the longer-term result of the Iraq misadventure was to overthrow the Sunni state that controlled Baghdad and replace it with a Shiite government that would inevitably mean greater Iranian influence. The toppled Iraqi government was Iran's main counterweight in the region.

Candidate Donald Trump understood that Iraq was a grievous –

“big, fat” – mistake. “We’ve destabilized the Middle East and it’s a mess,” he said in 2015. It “may have been the worst decision” in U.S. history. “It started ISIS, it started Libya, it started Syria,” Trump said as George W. Bush’s brother looked on. “Everything that’s happening started with us stupidly going into the war in Iraq... and people talk about me with the button. I’m the one that doesn’t want to do this, okay?”

Speaking at the Conservative Political Action Conference in his first year as president of the United States, Trump laid into the Mesopotamian mishaps. “We’ve spent trillions of dollars overseas, while allowing our own infrastructure to fall into total disrepair and decay. In the Middle East, we’ve spent as of four weeks ago, \$6 trillion. Think of it,” he said. “And by the way, the Middle East is in – I mean, it’s not even close, it’s in much worse shape than it was 15 years ago. If our presidents would have gone to the beach for 15 years, we would be in much better shape than we are right now, that I can tell you.”

“Great nations do not fight endless wars,” Trump [declared](#) in his State of the Union address just last year. “Our brave troops have now been fighting in the Middle East for almost 19 years. In Afghanistan and Iraq, nearly 7,000 American heroes have given their lives. More than 52,000 Americans have been badly wounded. We have spent more than \$7 trillion in the Middle East.”

Yet Iran has always been the [unprincipled exception](#) to Trump’s skepticism of regime change. In his zeal to reverse Obama’s legacy, he risks repeating Obama’s folly. For the 44th president also owed his election to the fact that he [recognized](#) Iraq was a “dumb war.” He left office with the U.S. mired in more wars of choice than before, including interventions in Libya, Yemen and Syria that have to varying degrees kept smoldering under Trump.

Trump's foreign policy team is replete with advisers ready to turn proxy wars with Iran inside Iraq into a wider conflict, people whose vision of "America First" is indistinguishable from the vision that gave us endless wars in the first place. So far, the president has [held them off](#). But his present course creates a high risk of war with Iran, and a resumption of hostilities in Iraq not limited to the fight against ISIS, whether he knows it or not.

At the very least, Trump may cede the war issue to the Democrats. "We should end the forever wars, not start new ones," tweeted Elizabeth Warren, the liberal presidential candidate who [trails Trump](#) in the battleground states and is even [losing to him](#) in Virginia, according to the latest Mason-Dixon poll, which hasn't voted for a Republican White House aspirant since 2004. Why throw her a lifeline by implementing the foreign policy of candidates he defeated in 2016?

Trump was elected to guard American borders. Patrolling the Iran-Iraq border will not get him reelected.

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