

# What Really Made the Iraq War Possible? A Constructivist Analysis of the Production of the American National Interest

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18.01.2021



## Main points

- The invasion of Iraq should not be seen only as a peculiar and hideous capture of the state structures performed by various lobbies or external influences. The real reasons for the war have a lot to do with the very foundations of the American political landscape.
- Finding new reasons as to how the war's *casus belli* was far from the truth distracts us from analyzing the generic Gramscian modes of thought which enabled doubtful and blatantly false claims to appear to be impartial and objective.
- The American national interest in Iraq was created through justifying that interest. For placing various events in a specific ideological and historical milieu is transformative to how we understand these very events.

**Seventeen years after the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq, there is a widespread consensus that none of the official reasons provided as *casus belli* for the intervention was grounded in reality.** Perhaps, it is this unprecedented deceitfulness — a distinctive feature of the Iraq War — that should be seen as one of the main factors contributing to the perception that it was a unique and transformative event. On the one hand, the false claims of the Bush administration about the nonexistent links between Iraq and al-Qaeda as well as Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) rendered visible, more than anything, the consequences of an unchallenged unipolar international system (Ismael and Ismael 2015: 47). On the other hand, the war's propaganda machine exposed the enormous influence of lobbies on the American foreign policy (Mearsheimer and Walt 2007). While these and many other insights into the political landscape of the United States are undeniably illuminating, they might conceal just as much as they reveal. Analyzing the Third Gulf War through the lens of its uniqueness could produce explanations, placing the history of the invasion into a category of perverse anomalies, almost exogenous to liberal democracies. The risk associated with such analysis is greatly illustrated by the analogous explanations “othering” the Holocaust from the West, obliterating the moral responsibility of the Western modernity (Barkawi and Laffey 2006: 341). In these frameworks, our understanding is necessarily constrained — what matters is a hideous capture of the state structures performed by various lobbies or external influences rather than the state

structures themselves. As such, this perspective obscures our understanding of how the very foundations of the American political landscape might be responsible for the invasion of Iraq.

**Drawing on the rich studies of the Third Gulf War, this essay argues that the main cause behind the 2003 Iraq War was the creation of an American national interest generating a natural propensity to see Iraq in general and Saddam Hussein's regime in particular as an enemy.** The first section explains the necessity of constructivist explanations in regards to the main causes of the invasion. The second section focuses on the elements influencing the production of the American national interest and foreign policy culture in the lead-up to the Iraq War and links them to the outbreak of the War itself.

### **Section I. Why constructivism?**

Many theories of international relations (IR) struggle to provide a coherent account of the 2003 Iraq War (Aydin 2016: 114). As Iraq did not pose any significant threat to the U.S. (Ismael and Ismael 2015: 50), reconciling the invasion with the American national interest might seem impossible. **This is a sentiment shared by many top-level American officials and its great manifestation can be found in the words of Richard N. Haass, a close advisor to the former Secretary of State Colin Powell: “I can't explain the strategic obsession with Iraq — why it rose to the top of people's priority list. I just can't explain why so many people thought this was so important to do”** (Haass in Hassan 2015: 66). Explaining the invasion through the use of traditional notions of interest becomes particularly problematic in the context of a largely unchanged distribution of power. This was an issue emphasized by many realist scholars arguing against the intervention, who pointed out that there is no reason to believe deterrence ceased to work with Hussein's regime, as his power, if anything, only decreased (Gregory 2014: 182). While realism, liberalism and other mainstream approaches in IR meaningfully differ in their assessment of the Iraq War, none of them offers a persuasive account of the invasion without disconnecting the conceptualization of interest from the outside environment. Although the American foreign policy towards Iraq went through a massive transformation in the years preceding the intervention, there is very little evidence that a comparable change happened in regards to the material international environment, expected to be determinant for the understanding of national interests in mainstream IR theories. But this problem is explicitly addressed by constructivism which argues that “ideas constitute those ostensibly ‘material’ causes in the first place” (Wendt 1999: 94). As such, constructivism is

a particularly apt theoretical inspiration because it promises to explain how the notions of national interest and power might change over time, while other theories push us to use fixed and restrictive categories. Constructivists — such as Jutta Weldes — do not make a distinction between the existence of national interests and ways in which these interests are legitimated. As these interests do not exist in a vacuum but rather come into being in historically-conditioned and biased representations, “the production of national interest is thus simultaneously the creation of consent” (Weldes 1996: 303). **In this context, the arbitrary connection between the War on Terror and the invasion created by the Bush administration cannot be ignored as an inconsequential manifestation of the American propaganda machine but rather treated as a relationship that becomes constitutive of the U.S. national interest.** The salience of this reformulation becomes significant if we contrast it with other explanations which assume the existence of interest prior to its formulation. For instance, Raymond Hinnebusch — representing complex realism — argues that the involvement in Iraq cannot be understood in terms of the American national interest, but it becomes more intelligible when the interests of the neo-conservative ruling class are included in the analysis (2007: 16). In so far as this is a valuable perspective, it still assumes the interests of these ruling classes to exist in separation from their legitimation. While it might be largely uncontroversial to claim that people tied to the oil industry have vested interests in policies which promote their profit, it is less clear why the interests of neo-conservatives are intrinsically tied to pro-Israeli policies. Being attentive to the social construction of interests becomes even more critical when it comes to the public perceptions of the American interests in Iraq. When one tries to analyze why the consent for the intervention was ultimately created, it should not suffice to assert the American propaganda was particularly effective. As outlined above, this perspective creates an analytically problematic tendency to overestimate agency of the Bush administration and underestimate the background in which the producers of consent operated. As Weldes argues, it is important to recognize that the shared meanings attached to national interests have hegemonic properties (1996: 304). At the very superficial level, this might be observed in the salience of nuclear taboo — special norms making the use of nuclear weapons unacceptable (Tannenwald 2008) — for the effectiveness of Bush’s claims about Iraq’s WMDs. More importantly, this insight is critical to demonstrate the very reasons as to why Iraq was targeted in the first place. It is only analyzing these generic Gramscian modes of thought that makes various claims appear to be impartial and objective, which can

accommodate for the unprecedented successes of the American propaganda in the lead-up to the Iraq War.

## **Section II. What was the conception of national interest that made the Iraq War possible?**

The real reasons for the Iraq War are nowhere to be found in the propaganda created to justify it. Nonetheless, this does not mean we should discount it, for there are important elements of this propaganda, which can highlight the very conceptualization of national interests responsible for making the Iraq War possible. One of these elements is seeing intervention as a decisive historical moment. This is best illustrated by neoconservatives — Robert Kagan and Bill Kristol — who argued that the invasion “will shape the contours of the emerging world order, perhaps for decades to come” (Kagan and Kristol in Ismael and Ismael 2015: 45). The belief that the Iraq War is somewhat intrinsically tied and historically important to the American national interest can be explained and analyzed in two regards. Firstly, the perception of the Iraq War as an element of the ideological and historical milieu of the War on Terror and the clash of civilizations. Secondly, the portrayal of Iraqis in general and Hussein’s regime in particular, creating the vision of an intervention as feasible and inevitable.

### **The Iraq War as a proxy war**

All the irrationalities of the Iraq War appear to be more intelligible if we take a look at the American propaganda at its best. The famous “one percent doctrine” of Dick Cheney — urging the U.S. to intervene even if there is only one percent chance of Iraq’s possessing WMDs (Suskind 2006) — seems much more rational if, in fact, there is something more about the Iraq War than the invasion itself. Tarak Barkawi eloquently argues that Americans believed there is “something more” precisely because the Iraq War was a part of a larger phenomenon influencing how the American national interests and state identity are defined — the War on Terror. Placing various events in a specific ideological and historical milieu is transformative to how we understand these very events. Barkawi argues that the War on Terror is akin to the Cold War, “when no amount of explaining that Third World conflicts had their own local sources or that they had systemic sources other than U.S.-Soviet confrontation (such as decolonization or the world economy) would serve to convince hawks in the United States that U.S. prestige and credibility were not at stake in Angola, or Indonesia, or Timbuktu” (2006: 498). **In this understanding, the Iraq War could be seen as a proxy war in the wider**

**conflict.** Conflating Hussein and his loyalists (enemies in a peripheral war) with terrorists (enemies of a greater war) allows treating them as such. This is not to be underestimated as such classification changes the boundaries of acceptable interactions whereby “any other strategy than ‘no appeasing of terror’ appears irrational” (Barkawi 2006: 501). As the discursive modes of the War on Terror are characterized by the Orientalist narratives of the clash of civilizations (Adib-Moghaddam 2011), the belligerents in different “episodes” of the War on Terror are seen as homogenous. The greatest manifestation of this might be seen in popular culture in general and military video games in particular. In the analysis of the latter, Johan Höglund points out that the player’s enemies in popular shooters are frequently placed in the Middle East but there is very little description of their motivations or historical backgrounds, to the extent that “sometimes the games take place in an imaginary locale such as ‘Zekistan’” (2008). It should not come as a surprise that the U.S. national interest was easily tied to the intervention in Iraq if the enemies in the War on Terror are popularly believed to have no specific properties other than their ascriptive characteristics of ethnicity and religion. Another manifestation of this homogenization was visible in the first days after the invasion, when regular Iraqi troops became designated to be terrorists by the U.S. Department of State in spite of its own definitions (Gregory 2004: 103). It is only when it does not matter whether American enemies come from Iraq or “Zekistan” that the Iraq War might be legitimated as in the U.S. national interest. As such, it is the enmeshment of the Anglo-American invasion in the narratives of the War of Terror that made its connection to the U.S. national interest plausible.

### **The Iraq War as a possible war**

In so far as the discussed conceptualization of the American national interest creates a natural propensity to see all regimes in the Middle East as enemies, **it should be acknowledged that Iraq was uniquely vulnerable to become an “episode” of the War on Terror.** The obvious explanation is that the intervention itself was — or, at the very least, was expected to be — beneficial to its orchestrators in the form of profits connected to oil and other economic sources (Al-Ali 2014: 10). While appreciating the importance of these motivating factors, it is also important to briefly analyze what made the whole process of creating an enemy uniquely feasible. One of the reasons can be found in the previous war with Iraq in 1991, which left Hussein’s regime in power. Perceived as a failure of the U.S. foreign policy (Ricks 2006: 5), Iraq became a site of particular importance to Americans. Arguably, there was no better place

to assert a “full spectrum dominance” as a part of the new U.S. grand strategy (Hinnebusch 2007: 9) than in Iraq where it was very blatantly questioned in 1991. Given the narratives associated with the War on Terror are intimately linked with the symbolism of humiliation (Callahan 2006: 399), their deployment becomes easier when there is, indeed, some evidence for humiliation.

## Conclusion

The question about the main causes of the Third Gulf War is the one that needs to account for a number of different actors motivated by a variety of factors. As such, constructivist explanations can be successfully applied to Hussein’s regime, the leadership of invading countries and many other relevant parties. While all those actors played a significant role in the lead-up to the Iraq War, it seems impossible to imagine the invasion without the discourse of the War on Terror. **It is this discourse and some Iraqi-specific factors that enabled the conceptualization and legitimation of the U.S. national interest in the ways conducive to the outbreak of the war.** As such, this should be seen as the main cause of the Third Gulf War.

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