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Thomas M. Renahan

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# The Struggle for Iraq



*The*  
STRUGGLE  
*for IRAQ*

*A View from the Ground Up*

THOMAS M. RENAHAN

Potomac Books

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Set in Lyon Text by Rachel Gould.

To my Iraqi staff—in Amarah, Baghdad, Basra, Erbil, and Hilla—who took the risks to share the struggle for democracy in Iraq and made my service in their country an inspiring and life-changing experience



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## *Abbreviations*

AC	Anti-Corruption
ADF	America's Development Foundation (USAID contractor)
AID	United States Agency for International Development
CAG	Community Action Group
CDP	Civic Dialogue Program
COP	chief of party
COR	Council of Representatives (Iraqi parliament)
CPA	Coalition Provisional Authority
CPI	Commission on Public Integrity
CSO	civil society organization
CSRC	Civil Society Resource Center
DCOP	deputy chief of party
DDA	Democracy Dialogue Activity
DFID	Department for International Development (UK)
DG	director-general
GC	governorate coordinator
HR	Human Rights
IBTCI	International Business & Technical Consultants, Inc. (USAID contractor)
ICMA	International City/County Management Association
ICNL	International Center for Not-for-Profit Law
ICSP	Iraq Civil Society Program
IDP	internally displaced person
IG	inspector general
IGC	Iraqi Governing Council
INA	Iraqi National Alliance
INL	Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (U.S. State Department)
IREX	International Research & Exchanges Board

ISCI	Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (political party)
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
IZ	International Zone (Green Zone)
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
LGP	Local Governance Program
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MMA	Michael-Moran Associates
MOM	Ministry of Municipalities (Kurdistan)
NGO	nongovernmental organization
PC	Provincial Council
PKK	Kurdistan Workers Party (Turkey)
PMFS	Popular Mobilization Forces
PSA	public service announcement (TV/radio)
PSD	personal security detail and, by extension, an armed security person working in one
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
RTI	RTI International (USAID contractor)
SCIRI	Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq
SIGIR	Special Inspector General for Iraqi Reconstruction
SIV	Special Immigrant Visa
TAL	Transitional Administrative Law
TI	Transparency International
TOT	Training of Trainers
UIA	United Iraqi Alliance (political coalition)
UNAMI	United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USRAP	United States Refugee Admissions Program

# The Struggle for Iraq



# Introduction

## *Iraq from the Ground Up*

On December 18, 2011, the last American troops left Iraq, or so it seemed until 2014. That milestone event completed a difficult but successful military mission that had overcome enormous and daunting challenges. About 4,800 Coalition troops had been killed in the struggle for Iraq, almost 4,500 of them Americans. Great Britain's losses constituted most of the rest. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis had died, most as innocent victims, a toll still rising every day.

Less noticed amid the understandable focus on military battles and casualties were the thousands of foreign civilians who joined the struggle for Iraq. I was one of those people. We started arriving soon after the Coalition invasion in 2003. I joined a small civilian army of American, British, and other expatriates deployed to help transition Iraq toward more democratic and more effective government, improve living standards, and rebuild much of its infrastructure.

As a political scientist and former city manager, the immediately critical democracy and governance work was where I thought I could help, but nothing in my education or career experience suggested that someday I would be working in Iraq. It was an adventure into the unknown and a dangerous one.

Eventually, I did three civilian tours in Iraq, one in each of its three major areas: southern Iraq, Central Iraq (Baghdad), and Kurdistan. People often ask me what it was like. This book is my answer. I was a small part of a nation's struggle to forge a new identity and a witness to history. My time in Iraq was often rewarding and even joyful, sometimes horrifying and sad, and ultimately unforgettable and life changing.

So much has been written and said about Iraq that one might assume we understand it clearly by now. In fact, there is still a lot we don't understand. Media reports, expert analysis, and political spin in Washington and London focused mainly on how military

and political events in Iraq affected U.S. or British interests. This was understandable but left an incomplete and misleading picture. The impact of those events on Iraq itself was often ignored or treated as secondary. Many media and political explanations were contradicted by reality on the ground. Meanwhile, those civilian projects got little coverage despite their importance in the overall Iraq policy. The view from the ground up has been missing. My purpose is to provide some of that perspective.

What we learned on the ground in Iraq is not just a history lesson. The internal struggle for Iraq is as intense today as it has ever been, its stakes are just as high, and it will continue for years to come. When President George W. Bush declared victory in 2003, Iraqis knew their struggle was not really over. When President Barack Obama declared in 2011 that the American military mission in Iraq was over, Iraqis knew his message was not about them. Such grand pronouncements from Washington convey the unintended message that developments in Iraq are mostly about us.

The withdrawal of American troops did not mean that Iraq did not need the United States anymore or that our commitment to Iraq was over. Too much was at stake for both countries. Those who believed we had no continuing interests in Iraq or that the country would succeed on its own or that further armed conflict would not occur there made a serious misjudgment. This became obvious in mid-2014 when the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) invaded northern Iraq, supported by many of the same Iraqis the United States had defeated in 2003 and helped to defeat again several years later.

In December 2003 I arrived in Amarah, the capital of Maysan Province north of Basra, to join the Local Governance Program of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID or AID), the Department of State organization that initiates, funds, and manages projects in foreign countries. What timing! Three days later Saddam Hussein was captured.

Although public attention focused initially on the Coalition Provisional Authority, which led the government until mid-2004, most of America's civilian effort was led by USAID. Britain's Department

for International Development (DFID) led the British effort. Many other civilian-type projects were carried out by military units or under their protection. USAID enlisted not only its own personnel but also international development companies and nonprofits. They in turn recruited thousands to carry out their projects and hired security companies that recruited thousands more to protect them. USAID itself called this civilian campaign “one of the largest efforts to provide foreign assistance by the U.S. government since the Marshall Plan.”

I came with no political agenda about whether invading Iraq was the right decision. That decision was hotly debated and raised doubts that will never go away but had already been made by others. I was a civilian public servant who came to help. From that motive I became part of the struggle for Iraq. I could not have imagined how difficult that struggle would be or the extent to which Iraq would come to dominate my life.

I soon became the advisor to the new Maysan Provincial Council and soon after that launched a major democracy campaign. Our Amarah team was making great progress, and I had a job that hugged me back. Seemingly quiet Maysan, however, proved to be dangerous. The invasion that deposed the Baathists set off a major internal power struggle, exposing major fault lines in Iraqi society and cultural tendencies toward threats and violence. The issues dividing Iraqis made our work harder and more dangerous. It’s not a good feeling when your success is interrupted by an insurrection. The southern Iraq experience is part 1 of the story.

The civilian focus of the book implies no disregard for the U.S. and British military, whose members performed heroically in Iraq and buried too many fallen heroes. The military story has been well told in countless books, articles, and media accounts, and many more will be added to chronicle the military struggle against ISIS. Much less has been reported about the thousands of dedicated public servants, from both government and contract organizations, who took personal risks and endured daily hardships to help Iraq. Many accomplished good things that never got reported. Many experienced heart-breaking tragedies and difficult crises. Not all of them returned home safely. This part of the Iraq story has seldom been told.



I have written this book to tell a small but meaningful part of that missing story. In doing so, I seek to represent, indirectly, a thousand other stories that deserve to be told.

My second tour of duty, described in part 2, was a memorable tenure in Baghdad, from late 2005 to the end of 2006, as the national Anti-Corruption manager for the Iraq Civil Society Program. This stint coincided with the worst of the sectarian violence that overwhelmed Baghdad and surrounding areas and made life there nearly unbearable for Iraqis. The view from our high-wall compound was often the smoke wafting up from deadly car bombs that sometimes shook the building. Still, my program had projects in all eighteen provinces, with innovative Iraqi civil society organizations that did great work. Time would show that the Iraqi public was more impressed with our anti-corruption campaign than were the corrupt. The timing of my Baghdad departure was as fortuitous as for my arrival. I left for the airport just minutes after Saddam was executed.

Working on the ground in Baghdad opened a window on the tribulations of the Iraqi people. When I arrived in Maysan, their big problems were the economy and massive unemployment. There were, however, underlying political tensions, rival militias, an emerging power struggle, and deadly incidents. Many Iraqis joined the Coalition-supported struggle to create a new and democratic Iraq, but others took up arms against it. Once the sectarian violence rolled over Baghdad, millions of Iraqis found themselves trapped. Those caught in the crossfire lived in fear and struggled to survive, and tens of thousands did not survive. I was responsible for a national Human Rights program too. It was not a good time for human rights in Iraq.

It is generally acknowledged that the Coalition's good intentions were undermined by a lack of knowledge and by political and strategic mistakes. My on-the-ground account puts more emphasis, however, on the terrible things Iraqis have done to each other. A balanced analysis is impossible without reference to Iraq's culture of violence, its religious extremism and intolerance, its gender inequality, its widespread lawlessness, and its pervasive corruption.

The better print and electronic media have covered Iraq almost continuously since 2003, understandably focusing mainly on military

news and political debates in Washington and London. There was extensive reporting and analysis of the sectarian violence, but the full impact on Iraqis could not be grasped from those media accounts. They reported the mass casualty statistics from suicide bombs and other terrorist attacks but not the vast number killed one at a time by death squads and individual assassins, political and religious extremists, insurgents and militiamen, Iranian agents, and common criminals. The awful impact on the victims' survivors was part of the unreported story. While the West debated how to deal with terrorism, the true meaning of terrorism was experienced by the Iraqi people.

The appalling security conditions directly affected our Iraqi staff members, who had to get home safely and return to work the next morning. My view from the ground up covers a small but important part of this mostly missing story. Security conditions greatly improved starting in 2007, from the success of the "surge" strategy led by Gen. David Petraeus, but life for most Iraqis remained difficult and often dangerous, and the violence worsened again starting in 2013.

My first-person account is also the context for analyzing Iraq issues in nontechnical language. Readers will learn a lot from this book, but please have patience for the explanations, as international development involves inherent complexities. I learned many important lessons, summarized in multiple chapters, including one addressed to USAID issues. During all its years in Iraq, USAID has collected thousands of official reports. This is an unofficial report.

The lessons learned address what went wrong but also what went right. Much of the cynicism about Iraq is misplaced. For sure some ideas did not work out as intended, more because of uncontrollable factors than USAID or contractor mistakes, but some of those ideas left something to build on, and many would work in other countries too. One of my projects finally succeeded four years after I left Baghdad. Despite the violence, and conceding the setbacks, people like me and my civilian counterparts accomplished a lot that wasn't reported. Iraq's continuing troubles don't invalidate the contributions of those who went to help.

In late 2007 I went to Iraq a third time, as a consultant to the Ministry of Municipalities of the Kurdistan Regional Government, in Erbil,

an agency with 30,000 employees in all corners of the region. I thus became one of the few expats with the distinction of having served in all three major areas of Iraq. I traveled over much of the region, made official visits to its largest cities and many smaller ones, and stayed throughout 2008. This is part 3 of my story.

The political viewpoints of Iraqis within the three major areas are as different as for people in three separate countries. The opportunity to compare them enabled me to relate developments in all three areas to the overall picture. That is one of my advantages in this book. The majority Shia, located mainly in southern Iraq, hated Saddam and hoped to inherit political power based on their numbers. The Sunni Arabs of Central Iraq, favored by Saddam, now faced an Iraq in which their traditional dominance was over. The Kurds, also Sunnis but not Arabs, looked forward to shaping their own future without deferring to Baghdad. The Baathist legacy hung over all of them but in sharply different ways.

My departure from Erbil was not the end of my story. I remained engaged with people and events in Iraq. My story brings events up to the present time. I have also described my efforts, with mixed results, to help Iraqis threatened because they worked for my projects or for other Coalition organizations to move to the United States or other countries for their own safety. I wish my government had done more to help such people, and some of those they failed died as a result.

In April 2014 Iraq held its national election in an atmosphere of crisis but with no inkling the situation would lead to disaster two months later, when ISIS seized Mosul and rampaged through much of Iraq. As events deteriorated, I was looking for a way to help. In mid-2015 I became coeditor of a new web-based newsletter based on Arabic-language sources, called *Daesh Daily*—*Daesh* being Iraqis' pejorative term for ISIS. It's a ground-up perspective that hopefully helps many government, military, think tank, media, and other practitioners. As Iraq's military fortunes improved, we chronicled and commented on its progress, made with enormous American help, but also its continuing internal problems. Iraq desperately needed meaningful reconciliation among its Shia, Sunni Arabs, and Kurds; a major reduction in political corruption; and a security climate in which people could

finally feel safe. By 2016 it was making progress toward these goals, but its future was still uncertain.

Part 4 outlines a reconciliation strategy for solving these complex and difficult policy issues and especially the future relationship of Iraq and the Kurds. These issues are much debated in both Iraq and the United States, often with wrong answers. Reaching successful outcomes depends on better answers and on continued U.S. diplomatic engagement with Iraq.

In total contrast to all the Iraqi bad guys we often read about are the modern-thinking, often college-educated Iraqis who want to live in a meaningful democracy, who relate easily to people from different religious traditions and different parts of the country, and whose worldviews are not anti-Western, anti-Christian, or anti-American. Some of those Iraqis worked for me and the organizations I served, and many times that number have worked for similar organizations, for the U.S. or British government, or for Western or other foreign news organizations.

Sadly, many Iraqis who went to work for Coalition organizations later realized they had risked their lives for their patriotism and those good-paying jobs. They were *not* protected by security once they left work. Especially in Baghdad, they went home to often dangerous neighborhoods and returned the next morning, never knowing who might be following them or whether this day might be their last. No position was low enough to avoid being targeted for working for the foreigners or for an Iraqi government accused of cooperating with them. Many kept their jobs a secret, even from people they knew. They were subject to death threats, and some of the death threats were carried out. Many others heeded the warning and quit their jobs. Hundreds of thousands left the country if they could. Some did not leave soon enough. None of these scenarios are hypothetical. All of them happened on my watch.

Because of continuing security risks in Iraq, I faced difficult decisions on the use of Iraqi names in writing this book. Some Iraqis identified as working with “the foreigners” are still potential assassination targets. Yet writing about people’s work and achievements

by using a string of aliases is unsatisfactory. Forced to choose, I used real names for those who left Iraq or died or who live in Kurdistan, where security is much better, or who told me they don't feel threatened. I also used the real names of public officials and a few others already well-known and so not at risk of being exposed by appearing in the book. I used only first names for some staff. I avoided using any names for most of those appearing once or twice in the story, depriving them of a little recognition but preserving their anonymity. All other names I changed in the interests of caution.

My story is written primarily for the informed general public, to provide a perspective on Iraq that helps in understanding the country better. Both international development practitioners and academic experts should find new information and insights from reading it, as I did from writing it, comparing my experiences with theirs and learning lessons from both. Readers will hopefully include USAID and other government staff who have served in Iraq. Military readers will finally find out what some of those civilian types were actually doing.

I have been extremely careful to get facts right. Because I am not from Iraq, there are probably passages that reflect some personal misunderstanding or relied on information from some Iraqis that might be disputed by others. At times I had to sort out direct contradictions. I can only apologize for any errors. English spelling of names and places and of Arabic words in general is often arbitrary and unavoidably varies by author. I put most Arabic words in italics.

This book is intended as a politically independent and balanced account. Yes, I do mean that. Attacking others is not my purpose. Mistakes were made and have been noted, and some were more apparent to those of us on the ground. Readers with sharply defined ideological perspectives may be disappointed with this approach. Those still trying to understand Iraq may appreciate it. Much about Iraq is just hard to understand, and it will take years to sort it all out.

Iraq has been a great professional challenge to all of us who have gone there to help and also a great learning experience and personal adventure. For me being in Iraq was an intensely personal journey. I have not tried to hide the emotional highs and lows. Iraq provided

some of the happiest moments of my life, thanks to all the shared experiences with expat and Iraqi colleagues, but some of what I observed and experienced was truly tragic.

Before going to Iraq, I had virtually no experience in coping with tragedies such as losing a friend to assassination or having a friend self-imprisoned at home under threat of assassination. As a lifelong civilian, I had never experienced the loss of buddies in warfare. I had no coping mechanisms for creating professional distance so as not to feel overwhelmed. I still don't, and the tragedies I experienced have changed me.

It will be apparent that I care deeply about the Iraqi people and came to feel I was a small part of their struggle. Serving in Iraq was a highly emotional experience that lives on. This is the world where I lived, and some of those who joined the struggle for the future of their country worked for me. They are among the people I care about most in this world. They are my friends and my heroes, and my spirit is with them.

For all of these reasons I came to think of myself as an American from Iraq. From that perspective I feel a personal loyalty to the people of Iraq in their ongoing struggle for security, stability, democracy, justice, and a better life.