

# Operation Iraqi Freedom – 2003 to 2011

**BLUF:** *Operation Iraqi Freedom* (OIF) was a prolonged armed struggle that began in 2003 with the invasion of Iraq by a United States-led coalition in an attempt to overthrow the government of Saddam Hussein. The conflict continued for much of the next decade, with insurgency emerging to oppose the occupying forces. An estimated 151,000 to 600,000 Iraqis were killed in the first couple of years of the conflict. In 2009, U.S. troops began their withdrawal from the region, though American troops continued to remain on the ground to train and equip Iraqi Security Forces. Other Americans remained who were employed by defense contractors and private military companies. Though OIF officially concluded in 2011, the U.S. took the lead in 2014 of a new coalition to combat new insurgent groups in Iraq. As of 2019, the U.S. is still actively involved in the military and administrative aspects of the Iraqi conflict.

**SETTING THE STAGE:** Following the 9/11 attacks, the Bush Administration began gathering information about the links to terror groups. The Taliban and al-Qaeda consisted of the masterminds behind the attacks. The Bush Administration believed that Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein was tied directly to al-Qaeda, and therefore had culpability in the 9/11 attacks. It was also surmised that Saddam was supporting the terrorist groups by producing "Weapons of Mass Destruction," which could be used on American targets in the future.

In January 2002, President Bush began referring to Iraq as the "Axis of Evil" to make his case to other world leaders. Major General Glen Shaffer of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff addressed the United Nations Security Council on 12 September 2002. In his address, he laid out the opinions of the military community as to Iraq's weapon producing capabilities. NATO and the United Kingdom supported the U.S. conclusions. France, Russia, and Germany, however, were skeptical of the findings. After considerable debate, the UN Security Council adopted UN Security Council Resolution 1441 as a compromise resolution in November 2002. Inspectors returned to Iraq to re-inspect all Iraqi facilities to assure the world that Iraq was not producing nuclear weapons. The United States continued to plead its case against Saddam to the world by sending Secretary of State Colin Powell to the U.N. on 5 February 2003. During his visit, Powell revealed further evidence of WMD production in Iraq. Despite evidence by the U.N. weapons inspectors in March 2003 that Iraq did not possess WMDs, the United States and its allies finalized preparations for the invasion of Iraq. On 17 March, President Bush demanded that Saddam and his two sons surrender and leave Iraq within 48 hours. The deadline came and passed, and on 20 March, the first assaults on Baghdad began.

**THE GENERAL STORY:** On 9 April 2003, U.S. and coalition forces quickly overpowered the Iraqi Army. At the end of April, Iraqi civilians and U.S. soldiers pulled down a statue of Saddam in Baghdad's Firdos Square. President Bush declared "Mission Accomplished" on 1 May. This proclamation officially ending critical combat operations in Iraq was given on the deck of the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln. Over the next three weeks, remnants of the Iraqi Army began turning themselves over to coalition military personnel. With the disbanding of the Iraqi Army, over 100,000 well-armed Iraqi men took to the streets. This event, along with the banishment of the Baathist party, would have significant repercussions on the direction of the war. The search for Saddam and his two sons took on more urgency throughout the next months. In June 2003, Saddam's sons, Uday and Qusay, are killed by U.S. troops during a raid in the northern city of Mosul. Saddam Hussein was captured in Tikrit on 14 December 2003.

In early 2004, the Bush administration conceded that it was mistaken about Saddam's extensive stockpiles of chemical, biological, and even nuclear weaponry. By March, al-Qaeda began a concentrated effort to resist coalition forces in Iraq. Al-Qaeda's activities helped to fuel sectarian civil unrest in different parts of Iraq. In the city of Fallujah on 31 March, four U.S. contractors were killed, burned, and hung from a bridge. Poor treatment of Iraqi prisoners by U.S. forces became public in April, which led to retaliation against Americans by al-Qaeda. With Iraq's national elections approaching, fifteen thousand U.S. and Iraqi troops assaulted the al-Qaeda stronghold of Fallujah in central Iraq. The urban warfare was successful, but 38 U.S. troops were killed.

Despite violent outbursts in specific sectors of Iraq in 2005, Iraqis went to polls to vote in their first democratic election. The election was held on 15 October to decide constitution issues for the new government. Two months later, Iraqis voted for their first, full-term government, giving Shiites majority control of parliament. Images of Shiites with ink-stained fingers, which was the sign that they had legally voted, appeared across the world to symbolize that democracy had been achieved in Iraq. By the end of the year, the Shiite United Iraqi Alliance announced that Nouri al-Maliki would be the new prime minister. Maliki was a long-time politician in Iraq who had close ties with Iran. His first order of business was to establish a unity government with Iraqi Kurds and Sunnis when he took office in April 2006.

The year 2006 in Iraq was generally one of democratic optimism. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, was killed in a U.S. airstrike near the city of Baquba. Many in Iraq believed his death would end the widespread violence by Sunni supporters. The trial of Saddam Hussein dominated most of 2006. On 5 November, Saddam was sentenced to death by hanging for "crimes against humanity," which was carried out on 30 December.

President Bush proposed a "new way forward" on 10 January 2007, in order to stabilize deteriorating conditions in and around Baghdad. The death of Zarqawi did not curb Sunni violence as expected. In some sectors, such as Baghdad, violence had increased in the form of suicide bombs and roadside improvised explosive devices (IED). The new plan was to send 25,000 more troops to Iraq to provide more security for the region. Among these troops would be newly signed naturalized soldiers, who were part of the Pentagon's new recruiting policy. Gen. David H. Petraeus assumed command of U.S. forces in 2007 to implement the new plan by President Bush. Under the so-called "Anbar Awakening," Petraeus began recruiting Sunni tribe members to take up arms against rebels fighting with al-Qaeda. These "Sons of Iraq" were financially supported by the U.S. at the cost of \$16 million per month. Initially, the Petraeus plan showed success as more militants allied themselves with the "Sons of Iraq," particularly in the central regions. In the northern region, however, the peace was shattered 19 August 2007 in the city of Mosul. With a series of coordinated suicide bomb attacks, hundreds were killed or wounded in one of the deadliest days of the war. The training and equipping of Iraqis, which was a primary goal of the coalition forces, continued through 2007. In December, the British gave over control of Basra, Iraq's second-largest city, to Iraqi forces. The Iraqi forces lost control of the city within a year to al-Qaeda led militants. By 30 December, U.S. war casualties totaled 900 for the year. Since 2003, nearly 4000 U.S. troops had died in the fighting, with an additional 30,000 wounded.

The final full year of the Bush Administration, 2008, saw some continuing progress in the spread of democracy. Some opposition politicians began taking part in the central government. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad made a State visit to Baghdad on 3 March 2008. President Bush appointed the U.S. commanding general in Iraq, Gen. David Petraeus, to lead Central Command in April, placing him in operational control of both the Iraq and Afghanistan. Lt. Gen. Raymond Odierno, was named the new commanding general in Iraq. The U.S. withdraw of troops will begin by September 2008, which was viewed by the Iraqi people as American confidence in their ability to expand democratic reforms. To further show American resolve, the U.S. military turned control of Anbar over to Iraqi Security Forces.

With the election of Barack Obama in 2008, the promise of drawdown was scheduled to begin in 2009. One of President Obama's primary campaign pledges was to withdraw American combat troops from Iraq within sixteen months. In February 2009, he began to remove combat brigades leaving 35,000 to 50,000 troops in Iraq as a transitional force. The primary purpose of the transitional force was to continue the training of Iraqi security forces. By June, the U.S. closed down over 150 of its military bases and outposts in Iraq. December 2009 marked the first full month in which there were no U.S. combat deaths since the beginning of the war. May was the deadliest month of 2009, with seventeen combat-related casualties and an additional eight non-combat deaths. In 2009, 149 U.S. troops were killed in Iraq, the lowest annual rate of U.S. military fatalities since the U.S. invasion in 2003.

Parliamentary elections were held on 7 March 2010 under tight security by Iraqi forces. Dozens of explosions shook Baghdad and other Iraqi cities. Despite the chaos, voter turnout was high, topping 62 percent. U.S. officials considered the elections a success and an essential step toward withdrawing U.S. troops in the summer of 2010. The United States officially ended its combat mission in Iraq on 31 August 2010, though 50,000 U.S. troops remained to train and partner

with Iraqi security forces. After more than nine months of political squabbling, the Iraqi parliament approved a coalition government created by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's *State of Law* party and several other factions. There remained an antagonistic relationship between former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi and Maliki, which the U.S. referred to as a possible stumbling block to U.S. troop withdrawal and combating terrorism in the country.

**THE MARINE CORPS STORY:** The United States Marines Corps has had an active role in Iraq since 2003. The I Marine Expeditionary Force, along with the U.S. Army's 3rd Infantry Division, led the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The Marines left Iraq in the summer of 2003. They returned, however, at the beginning of 2004. They were given responsibility for the Al Anbar Province, which is the region west of Baghdad consisting of extreme desert terrain. During this occupation, the Marines led an assault on the city of Fallujah in April, known as *Operation Vigilant Resolve*. The operation was initiated by the killing of four private contractors in Fallujah and five soldiers in Habbaniya in March 2004. During April and May, Marines carried out ground and air operations in an attempt to root out insurgents. A cessation in the fighting occurred during the summer and fall of 2004. In November, the fighting continued under *Operation Phantom Fury*, with some of the most intense urban fighting since *the Battle of Huế City* during Vietnam. This operation continued until 23 December 2004. The human cost of both of these operations was 122 Americans killed and nearly 700 wounded. Following 2004, the Marine experienced fierce fighting in the Iraqi cities of Ramadi, Al-Qa'im, and Hit.

Marines participated in the *Anbar Awakening* and 2007 surge, which reduced the degree of violence in Iraq. Between 2007 and 2010, Marines served in various operations; however, their primary mission was to train Iraqis to serve as a domestic security force. The official end of the Marine Corps presence in Al Anbar Province came 23 January 2010. At that time, they handed over responsibility for the region to the U.S. Army. Marines would return to Iraq, however, in the summer of 2014. This return was in response to growing violence in the country. Their mission was to quell the violence while continuing to train Iraqi troops.

During their time in Iraq, Marine dealt with controversy over the Haditha killings in 2005. The incident resulted in the murder of 24 unarmed civilians in the city of Haditha. Eight Marines were charged in the incident with only one convicted. The Hamdania incident, occurring in 2007, involved seven Marines and one Navy Corpsman. During the incident, an Iraqi man was kidnapped and shot to death. The Marines involved tried to cover up the incident. All of the participants faced numerous charges in the case, and they were brought to trial. Both events tarnished the Marine Corps' reputation and turned many Iraqis against the American presence in Iraq.

**AFTERMATH:** The last U.S. combat troops of *Operation Iraqi Freedom* left Iraq on 18 December 2011. Since 2003, more than 1,000,000 airmen, soldiers, sailors, and Marines served in Iraq. The economic cost of the war was \$800 billion. The human cost of the war was 4,500 Americans and over 100,000 Iraqis killed. In 2014 the U.S. renewed its official presence in Iraq behind a newly formed coalition force. This coalition was established to combat a renewed insurgency.

## QUESTIONS

1. How did Operation Iraqi Freedom reflect the continuing mission of the Marine Corps?
2. Which principles of warfighting are reflected in the Marine presence in Iraq?
3. What changes must the Marine Corps undergo to meet the demands of the War on Terror in the 21st century?

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