

Paul Bremer's Legacy in Iraq Is Being Expanded Across the Arab World

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Today marks 16 years since Paul Bremer, the former American diplomat, made history three times in the space of one month. First he was appointed head of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), the administration that ran [Iraq after it was occupied](#) by the United States in April 2003. This propelled him to the post of the most powerful American citizen outside the US comparable only to general Douglas MacArthur who commanded US occupational forces in Japan after its defeat in 1945.

A week later he made history once again when he signed Order Number 1 banning the Baath Party in Iraq and launching what became known as the “De-Ba’athification of Iraqi society”.

On 23 May 2003, he brought into effect CPA Order Number 2 called “Coalition Provisional Authority Number 2; Dissolution of Entities” disbanding the entire Iraqi military, Ministry of Defense, Ministry of State for Military Affairs, intelligence establishments and the whole security apparatus.

With little understanding of the serious damage his order would cause Iraq, Bremer earned his place in history as the man who, with a stroke of a pen, wiped out one of the oldest militaries in the region, decades of political doctrine and accompanying literally aspects reflected in millions of pages of novels, political theories and even short stories that impacted, greatly, the very idea of Pan-Arabism ever since the Baath Party was born in Damascus, Syria, in 1947.

Disbanding the military, along with the security service, made Iraq – the historical counter-weight to powerful Iran in the region – an easy prey to its domestic militias and even accessible for terror groups like Al-Qaeda. In later years Daesh would capture large swaths of Iraqi territory and maintain its control over it for over four years.

It was almost impossible for weak and fragmented Iraq to get rid of Daesh by itself and it had to depend on an international coalition led by the US; the perpetrator of the whole mess!

It is tempting to think that the US actually wanted Iraq weak and always in need of its military or security assistance. As if the whole illegal and brutal invasion of the country in 2003 intended, from the start, to push Iraq once again to become no more than an remote American colony.

Neither Bremer nor his top aides or superiors, including then president George W. Bush,

considered the consequences of their actions. In 2014 the world watched as Iraq collapsed.

Order Number 1, which saw the Baath party outlawed, led to the dismissal of its officials and cadres, closing its organisations; automatically hallowing out all institutions in the country and pushing Iraq in to chaos. This opened the door for hundreds of Iraqis who had been living in the diaspora, including agents of the US, to return and take over the country.

No one questioned the wisdom behind Orders 1 and 2 or their long-term effects on a country whose invaders said they had “liberated”. No question was asked as to what to do about decades of Baath doctrine that dominated the entire education system prevailing in much of the Arab world, within Pan-Arabism ideology that was cherished in the 1950s and 1960s. The Baath party in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and even Mauritania was much more than a political vehicle, it was a progressive ideology; an important tributary to the larger dream of Arab unity to which the late Egyptian leader [Gamal Abdul Nasser](#) devoted his entire life.

The Arab Socialist Baath Party was founded in Syria in the 1940s, principally, by Syrian intellectuals – Michel Aflaq, a Greek Orthodox, and Salah Al-Din Al-Bitar, a Sunni Muslim. Neither ever took office in either Syria or Iraq and both dreamed of the elusive Arab unity.

Bremer’s decision to ban the ruling Baath party was echoed in the Middle East during the Arab Spring when countries experiencing the Arab Spring went on to outlaw the parties from which their former leaders stemmed. These parties, in the case of countries including Tunisia, had previously helped liberate their people from the clutches of colonisers.

After its 2011 revolution, Egypt outlawed the National Party from which ousted dictator Hosni Mubarak stemmed. The party’s first objective was liberating the country from British colonial power. Its roots stretched in to the country since the 1920s.

In all three cases, wrongdoings or crimes committed by the regimes of the day were ascribed to the ideology of each of the three parties rather than to individual politicians.

Such generalisation is wrong and can only lead to discontinuity in the national political experiences.

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