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FIFTEEN years ago, on March 20, 2003, a multinational military coalition led by the United States and Britain invaded Iraq. The asserted main reason was to destroy the weapons of mass destruction that were supposedly being developed in the country.

Additionally, overthrowing Saddam Hussein's dictatorial regime and establishing democracy and human rights in its stead were stated as being among the main reasons for the invasion. For this reason, the operation was dubbed "Operation: Iraqi Freedom."

Prior to the operation, British prime minister Tony Blair presented an intelligence report purportedly from MI6 to then US president George W. Bush to be used as a *casus belli* against Iraq. The aim of this document was to convince the UN and the coalition countries of the supposed existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

Then US secretary of state Colin Powell attempted to sway the United Nations Security Council to act against Iraq on Feb 5 2003 by presenting the alleged evidence that he termed "irrefutable and undeniable" to the council.

Despite the supposed proof presented by MI6, the Security Council did not approve the operation, largely on the grounds of insufficient and valid evidence.

The invasion was launched in the absence of a UN Security Council decision and was a blatant violation of international law.

During the invasion and subsequent occupation, which lasted nine years, not one single weapon of mass destruction was found in Iraq. As a matter of fact, this reality was also laid bare by the 12-volume Chilcot Report that was compiled over the course of seven years and published on July 6 2016 by the Iraq Inquiry Committee.

Perhaps the most damaging conclusion drawn by the Chilcot Report is that the intelligence community began with the assumption that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction.

The report also rejected Blair's claim that the chaos and sectarian conflicts that came to pass could not have been predicted.

Saddam was without doubt one of the most ruthless dictators in modern history and mercilessly tyrannised his people. After the invasion, however, the people of Iraq were plunged into a catastrophe far greater than that under Saddam's rule, suffering horrific oppression, torture and injustice.

Iraq, which possesses the fourth largest oil reserves in the world, has become one of the most impoverished and miserable societies on earth. The whole country has been beset with instability, distrust, fear and terror.

Misconduct such as corruption, bribery, embezzlement and blatant thievery of state assets reached immense proportions. The Iraqi people's billions of dollars' worth of wealth flowed into the coffers of the occupying powers and some of their local collaborators; a great deal more of it has simply vanished into thin air, including several billion dollars in cash which has never been found.

In his article titled "Fifteen Years Ago, America Destroyed My Country" featured in the *New York Times*, an Iraqi author residing in the US, Sinan Atoon, wrote, " I never thought that Iraq could ever be worse than it was during Saddam's reign, but that is what America's war achieved and bequeathed to Iraqis".

No one to this day can give an accurate estimate of the death toll from the invasion and occupation.

According to the most realistic estimates, the number is over one million. The British medical journal, *The Lancet*, reports that the number of civilian casualties alone due to violence had reached 600,000 up to June 2006.

The era of destruction and disaster that began with the invasion of Iraq subsequently enveloped the whole region. Ranging from the Arabian Peninsula to the heart of Africa, a sea of fire and blood came about, fraught with wars, riots and massacres.

Terrorist groups that were formed during the invasion, extended the reach of radical terrorism to a global level. Artificial strife and hostilities were created and civil wars were fuelled by inciting denominational schisms.

This atmosphere was the very climate that was sought to be created by the invasion of Iraq, one of the major steps in the design of "The Greater Middle East" project, a plan by the Western powers and Israel to redraw the map of the Middle East.

In the end, it was realised once again that it is impossible to establish an environment of peace, democracy, tranquility and safety and completely eliminate terrorism in the Middle East through war, military invasion and outright occupation.

In countries such as Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, and Yemen that faced such intervention, the outcomes became even worse than what had existed before.

The harmful consequences of this violence had a negative impact on the invading countries as well. According to official numbers, during the invasion and occupation of Iraq, the US suffered more than 4,000 military casualties, thousands more were injured, and scores of soldiers were driven to depression and suicide after returning to their country.

The invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan have cost the US a staggering six trillion dollars (RM23.22 trillion) to date. That six trillion dollars achieved nothing other than turning the Middle East into a mass graveyard.

If that six trillion dollars had been used for the education of people and raising their awareness and economic development and advancement, today we would be living in a completely different world.

As for the Middle Eastern countries that have been constantly raided by the Western powers for one reason or another, it is time for reflection and introspection.

It is time for us Muslims to trace our way back to the straight path of Islam through Quranic teachings and the *Sunnah*. There is no other option.

Harun Yahya has authored more than 300 books, translated into 73 languages, on politics, religion and science.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20180411093300/https://www.nst.com.my/opinion/columnists/2018/04/355815/six-trillion-dollar-grave>

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