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The case for Iraqi reparations.

America illegally invaded Iraq in 2003, occupied and destabilized and flattened it, and then never left. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have been killed, and millions more have been made refugees or internally displaced persons. The consequences for the population are almost beyond comprehension: After decades of conflict, more than 2 million Iraqis are disabled, while the PTSD is inescapable. Entire generations have been left unable to look at the sky the same way.

The Iraqi people must be added, alongside the American dead and their families, to the register of 9/11's victims, after that day's events were used as a justification for war. The atrocities at Abu Ghraib prison, the bombardment of Fallujah, the attack on civilians in Baghdad's Nisour Square by the military contractor Blackwater — these events are a small part of a long list, made exceptional not by the character of their violence but by their outsize impact on the collective psychology. America trained, funded, and commanded Iraqi Interior Ministry special police forces to run a network of torture centers across the nation. Parts of Iraq are now rubble, a ruin-monument to western folly. One hundred military orders were signed into law by the U.S.-backed Coalition Provisional Authority to privatize state-run companies and amend the tax laws to facilitate foreign ownership.

America's engagements in Iraq can best be described as a multidecade colonization — a complete alteration of the country across military, sociopolitical, and economic domains in campaigns that stretch back at least to 1991. Since then, America has used every coercive measure in its arsenal: sanctions, de-Baathification, aerial bombardment, targeted assassinations, and the destruction of civilian infrastructure. And now, after six presidents at war with the country, the current administration has [promised](#) to “withdraw” U.S. forces by the end of the year — which is to say, trade green fatigues for gray, leaving intact a military-intelligence apparatus composed of scores of contractors and consultants that will prop up chosen chieftains and bureaucrats.

Iraq's people are among the many targeted by the global war on terror. As Americans sat enraptured by the [disasters unfolding in Afghanistan this August](#), I was left with a pit in my stomach. The attention being paid to Afghanistan, after years of neglect, clearly had more to do with the spectacle of American defeat than any genuine care for the lives of the Afghan people. Anniversaries like 9/11 are often treated as opportunities to navel-gaze about American grief, but the Arab and Muslim victims of the war on terror are not interested in what the U.S. has "learned" from its catastrophes or in an American redemption arc. In the case of Iraq, there is little new to be said that has not already been said by Iraqis: All America can do is honor its obligations to truth, justice, and reparation so that Iraqis can live full lives.

This call for "reparations" has mixed antecedents. In North America, demands have been made for reparations to, among others, the victims of transatlantic slavery and Indigenous genocide. Internationally, reparations have been proposed or implemented in nations like Germany, Colombia, South Africa, and Malawi. It is worth noting that Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger committed in 1973 to \$3.25 billion in reconstruction aid to Vietnam — a paltry sum that came with no acknowledgment of culpability for the war and that, unsurprisingly, never materialized.

In 2013, the Center for Constitutional Rights, a New York-based legal-advocacy organization, called for the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, a body of the Organization of American States, to hold a hearing on Iraqi reparations. The request has twice been rejected. If such a demand for monetary reparations sounds far-fetched, then consider the fact that Iraq itself has paid almost \$50 billion in reparations to Kuwait and other nations stemming from its 1990 invasion of Kuwait, honoring its commitments to the United Nations Compensation Commission long after Saddam Hussein was ousted.

A series of crimes deserving of reparations is obviously not the way Americans want to remember the Iraq War or the legacy of 9/11. The 9/11 Museum at ground zero sells nostalgia, jingoism, trinkets. Where in this monument is the acknowledgment of the *arrogance*? Where is the acknowledgment of the lies peddled to the American people (lies too eagerly accepted) that manufactured consent for a war against a nation that had nothing to do with 9/11?

My great-uncle used to work in Iraq. He died a few years ago. My mother's cousin Eliana did, too, as an interpreter for refugees. Iraq was welcoming to many Palestinians dispossessed of their homes by Israel. Perhaps Iraq is made personal for me in this way, but I suspect that Iraq is personal for all Arabs — a place that showed a whole generation of us just how disposable

our lives are.

The architects of the Iraq War gathered the American victims of 9/11 — the grievable lives — into a narrowly circumscribed “we.” America then demanded vengeance and sought security on behalf of this “we,” foregrounding itself as the chief party in conversations it conducted about extremism, civilizational conflict, and domestic security. The radicalism of reparations lies in its subject-object reversal: in its insistence that the “we” worth caring about is the Iraqi people; in its demand that they receive restitution.

What might that look like? Reparations mean, first and foremost, that the U.S. would end all facets of its occupation of Iraq. It would issue a formal apology for its involvement in the destruction of the country. Iraqi refugees would have the right to resettle in the U.S. should they desire, or the U.S. would facilitate resettlement to other nations of the refugees’ choice. The U.S. would commit substantial financial resources to rebuilding the infrastructure, land, and homes it destroyed and to addressing the environmental degradation it caused, including the removal of explosives, depleted uranium, and the chemical-weapons-precursors that American companies provided to Saddam Hussein during the 1980–88 Iran-Iraq War.

The U.S. would also commit to individual monetary reparations for the victims of the wars, including support for the families of those killed, tortured, or disabled — far above the “condolence payments” preferred by the Coalition forces. The U.S. would close Guantánamo Bay and shutter any remaining CIA black sites in Iraq. It would allow for an Iraqi-led truth-and-reconciliation process that brought U.S. military and political personnel and private contractors acting on the orders of the American state to trial. The U.S. would also allow its military and political leaders to be fully investigated by international war-crimes tribunals for their roles in the illegal occupation and the torture of the Iraqi people.

Reparations will not prevent future American invasions nor repair the Iraqi lives destroyed. They will not counteract the primary forces at work here: the maintenance of empire and all its profiteers. Moreover, the responses to these demands write themselves: impractical, irresponsible, imprecise, ill-timed, and yes, improbable, too. Should that matter? In 2003, then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was famously unsure “who the bad guys are in Afghanistan and Iraq.” That question is answered; now, time for courage.