

Today marks the five year mark of the beginning of the war in Iraq. There have been a lot of ink spilled to commemorate the occasion, but [this article](#) in the [Wall Street Journal](#) by [Fouad Ajami](#) stands out.

*Wars have never been easy to defend. Even in "heroic" cultures, men and women applauded wars then grew weary of them. This Iraq war, too, was once a popular war. It was authorized and launched in the shadow of 9/11. During the five long years that America has been on the ground in Iraq, the war was increasingly forced to stand alone...*

*In the five years that America has been in Iraq, this drawn-out war has seemed like a fight between American power and the laws of gravity. Sectarianism tested our souls and our patience; the fury of the region around Iraq was bottomless. Its misfits found their way onto Iraqi soil. We wanted a new life for that country, and there were sectarian hatreds beyond our comprehension...*

*In Iraq, America was surrounded by enemies who were sure from the start that the great foreign power was destined to fail. They could not be given the satisfaction of a hasty American retreat. The stakes had grown: We were under the gaze of populations with a keen eye for the weakness of strangers. It was apt and proper that the leader who launched this war did not give up on it...*

*In the five years that America has been in Iraq, this drawn-out war has seemed like a fight between American power and the laws of gravity. Sectarianism tested our souls and our patience; the fury of the region around Iraq was bottomless. Its misfits found their way onto Iraqi soil. We wanted a new life for that country, and there were sectarian hatreds beyond our comprehension...*

*Still, five years on, this endeavor in Iraq is taking hold. The U.S. military was invariably the great corrector. In their stoic acceptance of the mission given them and in the tender mercies they showed Iraqis on a daily basis, our soldiers held out the example of benevolent rule. (In extended travel in and out of Iraq over the last five years, I heard little talk of Abu Ghraib. The people of Iraq understood that Charles Graner and Lynndie England were psychopaths at odds with American military norms.)...*

*In those five years, the scaffolding of the war came under steady assault. People said that there was no connection between al Qaeda and Saddam, that no "smoking gun" had been discovered, and that the invasion of Iraq had turned that country into a breeding ground of jihadists.*

*But those looking for that smoking gun did not understand that the distinction between secular and religious terror in that Arab landscape was a distinction without a difference. The impulse*

*that took America from Kabul to Baghdad was a correct one. Radical Arabs attacked America on 9/11, and a war of deterrence had to be waged against Arab radicalism...*

*So we did not turn Baghdad into a democratic city on a hill, and we learned that the dismantling of Sunni tyranny would leave the Arab world's Shiite stepchildren with primacy in Iraq. A better country has nonetheless risen, midwifed by this American war. It is not a flawless democracy. But compare it to the prison it was under Saddam, the tyranny next door in Damascus and the norms of the region, and we can have a measure of pride in what America has brought forth in Baghdad...*

*There has been design and skill in recent American endeavors. The Sunnis had all, but wrecked their chances in the new order. The American strategy in the year behind us worked to cushion the Sunni defeat. The U.S. now sustains a large force of "volunteers," the Sons of Iraq, drawn mainly from the Sunni community. This has not met with the approval of the Shiite-led government, but the attempt to create a balance between the two communities has been both deliberate and wise...*

*In the past five years, the passion has drained out of the war's defenders and critics alike. Our soldiers and envoys are there, but the public at home has moved onto other concerns. Still, the public is willing to grant this expedition time, and that's for the good. There is no taste in this country for imperial burdens and acquisitions in distant lands. But Americans also know that the lands and sea lanes of the Persian Gulf are too vital to be left to mayhem and petty tyrants...*