

Iraq and after: setting the scene for rethinking Europe's role in the Middle East*

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How should we think productively about Europe's role in the Middle East? The key areas around which agreement are needed are:

- What are the facts on the ground?
- What outcomes do we desire (ie: what do we want future facts to be)?
- What policies will achieve these outcomes?
- What incentives are there to encourage players to implement the needed policies?

Disagreement can exist at any level, and we need to know where the agreement and disagreement lies before we can strategise a role for Europe, and work out what the role of civil society could be in promoting that role.

Facts on the ground

Facts are important. The sheer length of the Iraq conflict inures us to the impact of events. We are tempted to feel that things are not so bad because normal life goes on here in Europe. European soldiers are not coming home in body bags. Europeans are not dying from suicide bombs.

In February 2004, the Iraq Body Count project which I co-founded reported 10,000 civilian casualties of the war to date. A British Newspaper, *The Independent on Sunday*, ran with this as their front page story. When I talked this through with the journalist responsible for the story, he was almost in tears, tears of frustration at the level of carnage. Now it's at least 10 times worse. Yet the reporting is more and more on the back pages. The fact that one in six Iraqis is now a refugee is not headline news. To talk of things "getting better" as General Petraeus does, can only be sustained in relation to the appalling levels of violence which have now become "normal" in Iraq. Taking 2006 as a reference, then the number of civilians killed in 2007 has indeed fallen by a few thousand. But that must be put against the following facts:

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- The number of people killed by US forces is rising. Twice as many were killed in 2007 as in 2006
- The number of large bombings killing more than 50 people is rising.
- The death toll in the last quarter of 2007, although lower than for some while, has simply returned Iraq to the level of killing seen in late 2005.

On his visit to Iraq in November 2005, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said of the situation then: "This region, and particularly Iraq, has suffered too much from terrorist attacks... Even those who are at a distance feel the pain and the misery that is being inflicted on families and innocent citizens."

Each additional death makes things worse for somebody. It is one more unnecessary victim to add to the total. It is one more set of loved ones propelled into grief and anger. A decrease in the rate of daily killing is not an improvement in any other than a comparative, impersonal sense.

Facts on the ground are constantly in danger of being subverted to domestic political agendas in countries other than Iraq. According to our politics, we are tempted to use facts, not for what they tell us of the realities on the ground, but to support our arguments for or against the policies of our own leaders. Iraq has for most of the key players never been ABOUT Iraq, or the needs of the Iraqi people. It has been about at least the following:

- Iraq is the chosen battle ground for the US/Al-Qaeda conflict (and our analysis is that Al Qaeda has the upper hand to date).
- Iraq is a "stepping stone" en route to the real regional goal which is regime change in Iran. Key neoconservative figures have always been completely open about this.
- Iraq is a key US target in the attempt to control the oil reserves of the ME, which is the founding purpose of CENTCOM.
- Iraq is a symbolic and cultural focus of Western debates about what defence means in a globalised post-communist world, and debates about how to cope with multiculturalism and a multi-faith society. Iraq is a mirror we hold up to ourselves.

If we are seeking our proper role, we have to agree on whose needs have to be at the centre. Of course there must be self-interest and incentives for all parties. Solutions must be win-win, but different actors may place different priorities at the centre. Human Security perspectives suggest that we start with the needs of those people whose actual security is lowest (and the prime index of which is the prevalence of violent death). Such needs are most acute in Iraq, followed by the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and then Lebanon.

Outcomes, policies, and incentives

The key goal becomes therefore to end the violence in these places and prevent it spreading elsewhere. Alternative solutions not involving violence are needed. Is there an agreed set of policies and actions to deliver this outcome, or are they still to be developed and agreed? If there are clear policies - how may key actors be provided with the necessary incentives to adopt them? What are the incentives for Europe, and are they the same across Europe in the different countries? Which countries count as Europe? Should we include Turkey?

Principles and parameters of any workable way forward: an Oxford Research Group view:

- Any solution must be based on a return to international law and the authority of international institutions, including those which place strict limits on the use of military power. Coalitions of the willing only gain, or regain, legitimacy when operating in such a framework.
- Any solution must be inclusive, in that voices with local legitimacy and influence need to be heard. If they are excluded from the political process they will disrupt the process from outside, including violently.
- Any solution must be regional, in that it must simultaneously address the security needs of all the nations and peoples involved, especially those of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, and Egypt.
- Any process should be well defined and sustained, not vulnerable or derailable by events, whether inflammatory presidential statements, electoral timetables, or serious upsurges in violence. As in Northern Ireland, peace initiatives tied to particular high-profile individuals or events need to be replaced (or underscored) by processes which keep the talking and implementations going whatever is happening outside, and without any precondition for a seat at the table.

Now that even General Ricardo Sanchez can recognise this 5-year project which has no end in sight as a “catastrophic failure,” is it time to revive and improve upon the best ideas of the Iraq Study Group and the UK’s Iraq Commission and find players willing to promote robust alternatives that learn from, and are informed by, the catastrophe, instead of endlessly repeating it?

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