

Lessons from Iraq.

The creation of modern Iraq.

Upon the collapse of the Ottoman empire in 1918- after its defeat in the first World War- the “liberated” indigenous populations (Arabs, Druzes, Turkomans, Kurds, Jews) with differing religions (Sunni and Shia Islam, Christianity, Tudeism) were thrown together into new and theoretically free European-type nations. The brand-new League of Nations graciously allocated the supervision of the nation building process to the victors: To France the “mandate” over Lebanon and Syria. To Great Britain the “mandate” over Palestine, Jordan, Mesopotamia (now called Iraq) and Kuwait. The Ottomans had always administered Kuwait from Basrah in Iraq, but the British, remembering their relations with local sheikhs of the Sabah family, kept it separate. The borders between these nations were drawn by European surveyors as straight lines in the sand, taking into account as far as possible natural boundaries like mountain ranges, traditional trade routes, tribal camel grazing rights, etc, but those borders still remain artificial and contested to this day.

The state of Iraq, formally created in the British image: complete with parliament, a prime minister and a constitutional Hashemite monarch, king Faisal, never worked even remotely as a democracy. Centrifugal forces always made for a harsh dictatorship by the king or the prime minister in order for the State to survive.

Iraq oil was discovered in 1927 in Kirkuk (the Kurdish North) and its exploitation concession awarded to a British, Dutch, American and French consortium, the IPC. A decade later, the worlds largest oilfield was discovered in Kuwait to be exploited by a British oil company, later joined by one American partner. A powerful argument for Britain to keep its oil separate under the submissive Kuwait regime rather than in one basket with unpredictable Iraq.

When Iraq gained full independence in 1932 one of its first official actions was to lay claim to Kuwait and to parts of Iran. Saddam Hussein did not have to invent these claims.

Aftermath of the second world war.

Iraq has a genius for picking the wrong enemies. In 1941 it unfortunately chose the side of the Axis powers against the British. The latter landed an army at Basrah and easily re-occupied the country. The Iraqi government fled to Germany leaving the British free to install a friendly new government under prime minister Nuri Said.

The 1948 war against Israel (lost again) gave rise to a vehemently pro-Arab backlash in Iraq, causing 120.000 of Iraq’s long standing resident Jewish community to flee for their lives to Israel. Ten years later, in 1958, king Hussein of Jordan proposed to join his country with Iraq and Kuwait to form a united Hashemite kingdom. The British, with their oil interests in mind, opposed this plan and declared Kuwait independent. In the turmoil, general Qassem seizes the opportunity to overthrow the now unpopular government and crowds hang and dismember the bodies of the king Faisal 2 and Nuri Said. Iraq becomes a military dictatorship dressed up as a republic. When Qassem

then confirms Iraq's claim to Kuwait, the British respond by sending troops to the tiny emirate, preventing a military takeover.

Qassem, after suppressing a revolt by the Kurds under Barzani, is murdered by members of the Baath party in 1963. Saddam Hussein, a Baath party member, rises to become a power in the land, first under president Al Bakr, but in 1979 assuming the presidency of Iraq himself.

Due to the quadrupling of the oil price in the 1973 energy crisis, Iraq, with an oil export capacity of 2,2 million barrels per day is now in position as one of the richest and most developed countries of the Middle East. Oil income is well above 20 billion dollars a year. Per capita income is 15000 dollars a year. Education and health care are on the increase. Agriculture flourishes and under-nourishment is unknown. But Saddam Hussein in Bagdad has to lean heavily on the mukhabarat, the secret police, and on the army, to keep the Sunni's in power over the 60% majority of the Shiite population, who live in relative poverty in the South as well as over the restless Kurds in the North. (But at least, Iraq always allowed them to use the Kurdish language, which is still mercilessly suppressed in neighbouring Turkey). To any outside visitor, Iraq feels like a paranoid police-state. I was arrested in 1966 in Bagdad airport for speaking Arabic "with a Jewish accent".

The following outlines the dramatic "de-development" of this prosperous Iraq and the decline of per capita income to barely \$500 a year.

The Iraq-Iran war, 1980-88.

1979/80 marks the turbulent overthrow of the Shah of Iran by the Islamic fundamentalist, ayatolla Khomeini. The oil price rises to an all-time high of some 50 dollar per barrel and both, Iran and Iraq, could have cashed in peacefully on this totally unexpected addition to their oil wealth.

Middle Eastern countries however always maintain a rich tinderbox of justifications for war with neighbours:

- Iran incites revolt by the Shiite's in Iraq forcing Saddam Hussein to execute a number of their unruly ayatolla's. Iran is behind an attempt on the life of Iraq's foreign minister, Tariq Aziz. Both countries also incite each other's Kurdish minorities to revolt.
- Saddam Hussein personally ordered the expulsion of Khomeini from Iraq (to Paris), for which Khomeini has sworn revenge.
- Territorial claims abound, some of them important such as the sovereignty over the Shatt el Arab, the only waterway over which Iraqi oil can be exported.

In 1980 the Soviet equipped Iraq army attacks Iran, whose American equipped army is hampered by the decapitation of their officer corps through the Ayatolla's religious prosecution and by the prosaic lack of American spare parts and maintenance. Nonetheless, the Iraqi offensive soon grinds to a halt, having failed to take Abadan.

In 1982 Iran counterattacks by "human wave" offensives of "pasdaran", relatively untrained zealots from the age of nine up to sixty, led by Mullah's. They make some advances into Iraq. The rest of the tragic and fiercely fought war remains basically a

stalemate. Iraq suffers an estimated 375.000 killed and Iran perhaps as many as a million by the time the armistice is imposed on the exhausted combatants in August 1988 by UN Security Council resolution 598. The vast majority of the recently unearthed mass graves contain the victims of Iraq's many inconclusive wars.

The most important lesson of this war is however that Iraq avoided defeat against a much larger Iranian enemy only by deeply indebting itself to obtain massive technological, financial and diplomatic support from its Western backers who considered fundamentalist Iran the bigger evil of the two.

The USSR re-supplied Iraq as from 1982 with billion dollars worth of the latest T55 and T62 tanks, rocket launchers, Mig 24 gunships and helicopters and Sam missiles.

The French in 1984 delivered 30 Mirage ground support fighter aircraft and the latest super etandard fighter bombers for attacks with exocet rockets against Iranian oil shipping (as a result of hundreds of air attacks by both combatants on shipping and installations, oil exports from the area dropped by 50%, keeping world oil prices high).

In 1981 the US supplied 5 Boeing air tankers to Iraq to enable it to bomb targets deep into Iran. In the same year Iraq was removed by the US senate from the "list of nations supporting terrorism". In 1983, Donald Rumsfeld, at US president Reagan's instigation, offered Saddam in Bagdad billions dollars worth of munitions and weaponry, which specifically included biological and chemical weapons, bothulin toxins, anthrax, nile fever virus and mustard gas and the technical means to produce maintain and deliver these products. A 2 billion dollar credit for the purchase was routed through the Banca de Livorno to conceal the source. At the same time satellite and electronic intelligence was routinely passed to Iraq.

Curiously, the "Iran contra scandal" reveals that the Reagan administration simultaneously kept supplying modern weapons and equipment to Iran through Israel. "Arms for hostages" was operated by the CIA, who even seem to have supplied Iran with lists of plotters against the regime, who were later executed as a result.

The occupation of Kuwait and operation "Desert Storm" 1990, 1991.

Perhaps misled by the strong American support during his war against Iran war and by verbal re-assurances of non-interference from the American ambassador in Bagdad, president Saddam sent his army to occupy Kuwait.in 1990. But Kuwait being a friendly key supplier of oil to the West and Japan, the UN security council wasted no time in condemning the occupation and imposing drastic sanctions on Iraq.

The US-led military re-action, blessed by the UN security council, started out by first bombing Iraq and its infrastructure "back to the stone age". 140.000 tons of high-precision guided explosives, the equivalent of 7,5 Hiroshima bombs, destroyed 75% of Iraq's water, electricity, sewage, bridges and petroleum installation capacities as well as its armed forces establishments. The bombing killed perhaps 100.000 Iraqi's turning the subsequent allied ground invasion into a walkover. It was halted as soon as the military objective of the UN resolution was achieved. Later this prudent decision has been much criticised by the neo-conservatives in the Pentagon. But to

have followed up military success with an enforced unprepared “regime change” in Bagdad at the time, without endorsement by the UN, probably would have been the worst option. It would have de-legitimised the operation in the eyes of the Arab neighbours and of the world and in any case, no credible blueprint for a brave new Iraq existed then or at any time later. Look at the resulting chaos today.

Incidentally, the US received handsome repayments for its military exertions. Kuwait alone is reported to have versed 16,5 billion dollars to the American treasury, whilst Japan, Germany and Saudi Arabia paid in similar amounts. The world oil price returned to the 20 dollar range and below. All was well again. Saddam was merely a wounded animal, presiding over an impoverished and deeply divided country with a defeated army. The repayments of of Iraq’s debts (including for weapons bought during the Iran war), on instructions from the UN security council, would take all of Iraq’s oil income for many years to come.

To keep him in that powerless situation, the Security Council ordered, in its resolution 687 (April ’91), the destruction of arsenals and means of production and delivery of all weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq under international supervision by UNSCOM. But it was justly criticised for “over-kill” when it left the punitive wartime sanctions of its resolution 661 (August 1990) in place during the following “peace”.

Enforced No-fly zones, 1991-2003.

Meanwhile, the US and UK, without United Nations blessing, instituted military “No-Fly zones” for Iraqi fixed wing aircraft over more than half of Iraq. Over the Kurdish area north of the 36th parallel, ostensibly to protect the Kurds from reprisals by Saddam Hussein and over the southern area below the 33rd parallel, to protect the Shiites. (The protection of the Kurds however did not extend to interdiction of the Turkish Airforce, which was allowed to bomb Kurdish fighters on the Iraqi side of the border). The enforcement by the two allied airforces, operating out of Turkey and Saudi Arabia, over the twelve year period up to 2003, soon settled into a fixed pattern of harassment and cat and mouse games with Iraqi radar and anti-aircraft positions, which had little to do with its original purpose. By 1995 the US State Department admitted that the no-fly zones did not protect the minorities at all. But the political message comes through loud and clear: we prefer to cut Iraq into three separate ethnic/religious zones rather than allow Saddam to hold it all together by force. (But the allies could hardly object when in 1996 the Kurdish KDP themselves invited Saddam’s army to help them defeat their rivals of the PUK, the patriotic union of Kurdistan.).

The UN sanctions regime (UN security council resolution 661)

Before “desert storm”, Iraq imported over 70% of its food, medical, chemical and industrial supplies. Without these imports it was unable to survive and the “human catastrophe”, as the New York Times called it, was therefore unavoidable. “Medecins sans frontieres” quote some random figures: Infant mortality rose from 600 deaths in 1989 to 6700 in 2000. The percentage of registered birth weights of under 2,5 KG rose from 4,5% in 1990 to 25% in 2000. Malnutrition in children under five rose from 8500 in 1990 to 190.000 in 2000. Former US attorney general, Ramsey Clark warned

in his visit report to the UN against the “genocidal effect” of the sanctions. As late as 1998, humanitarian co-ordinator for Iraq, Dennis Halliday, wrote: “We are in the process of destroying an entire society. It is as simple and terrifying as that.”

Those who died were of course mainly the cannon fodder of Saddam Hussein’s army. The regime itself remained intact and profited from evading the sanctions, as did the smugglers in neighbouring Jordan, Syria and Turkey. Through an efficient food rationing system, Saddam controlled his impoverished population more efficiently, than before when using his police.

In 1996 under pressure from the French and Russians and over US and UK objections, the UN tried to mitigate the horrible effects of sanctions by starting the “Oil for Food program”. Iraq was allowed to export from 1997 to 1999 over 20 billion dollars worth of oil. Some 70% earmarked for food imports, the rest for repayment to Kuwait and US/UK for war damages. But the extensive delaying tactics by some UN members in the approval of food and other essential imports made that a large part, some 5 billion dollars, of the humanitarian money available under the program was never spent.

Unscm inspections and search for weapons of mass destruction. (UN security council resolution 687, 1991)

The UN resolution, stating that the Middle East should be free of nuclear weapons, (- but hey, what about Israel?-) forbids the existence in Iraq of any nuclear weapons or weapons programs. The international atomic energy agency (IAEA) under Mohamed El Baradei is charged with carrying out this instruction by inspections on the spot and by the destruction of any offending nuclear materials and facilities it may encounter. Iraq’s only nuclear reactor under construction at Osiris having been totally destroyed by Israeli jets back in June 1981, the IAEA finds during the twelve years of their search no evidence of ongoing programs and concludes that Iraq can no longer present a nuclear danger. The Iraqi authorities co-operation was total. This conclusion, unwelcome to the US and UK governments, has been vigorously contested by their intelligence agencies, however without ever being able to produce any contrary evidence.

The UN resolution also orders the destruction, under Unscm supervision, of all chemical and biological weapons together with their means of manufacture and delivery. UN inspectors accordingly supervise over the years the destruction of existing stocks, of any doubtful “dual purpose” facilities which could either produce agricultural chemicals or chemical weapons. Madeleine Albright, president Clinton’s Secretary of State, is on record as saying that even a shoe factory can be considered “dual purpose”, because it could well make combat boots. Unscm continues diligently to destroy Scud missiles and any rockets it can find with a range superior to 150 KM. Until in 1997 weapons inspector Scott Ritter can declare: Iraq is disarmed in the nuclear, biological and chemical fields; it has no ballistic missiles and no capacity to rebuild. In WMD it is a threat to no one.”

But the expectation of most UN members, shared by the Iraqi government and the reason behind their submission, was that the sanctions would be lifted as soon as unscm gave the all-clear. Or, Richard Butler, the Unscm director, although he

declared that 95% of the inspections went unhindered, was annoyed by being disallowed access to Saddams palaces. Moreover, there were problems with the accounting for destroyed stocks of chemicals. How could he ever be 100% sure that he had verified every possible nook and cranny? Iraq accused the US of including full time CIA agents as inspectors. A claim that was never denied. And so, the inhuman sanctions regime which helped to keep Saddam in power was allowed to be perpetuated.

The inescapable conclusion from all of the above, it seems to me, is that the twelve years of UN sanctions, following the ravages of the “just” war “Desert Storm”, did more lasting harm to the Iraqi population and infrastructure, including education and medical care and caused more Iraqi deaths than the repression of his own people by Saddam. His repression of minorities was no more harsh than that of the Kurdish minorities in Turkey and Iran. Only the Iran-Iraq war caused more human suffering, but in that senseless conflict and in his chemical warfare he was powerfully enabled and urged along by the same nations who now accuse him. Saddam is their creature. By the time President George W. Bush, after 9/11, took the unilateral decision to eliminate him, in spite of no links to international terrorism like El Qaida, Saddam presented no longer a threat to his neighbours and could have been contained at far lesser cost by applying UN security council resolution 1441. The prolonging of the sanctions and the subsequent war seem based on a major failure of the “politicised” US and UK intelligence services.

An interim report presented by David Kelly of the CIA in October 2003, on the intensive search for WMD throughout occupied Iraq, admits that WMD may never be found. To salvage his agency’s reputation however, he has asked for a 700 million dollar budget to continue the search and will surely have to come up in future with some evil Iraqi conspiracy to acquire such weapons.

“Operation Iraqi Freedom”

The massive US/UK military invasion in March 2003 succeeded in overthrowing Saddam Hussein and finishing off what remained of the civilian infrastructure. The subsequent failure to maintain security and restore order and services quickly soured the “liberation” aspect and the US command had to admit its involvement in a continuing guerilla war.

“The Iraqi governing council”

After initial confusion, in which general Jay Garner (from the Pentagon) noticeably failed to establish some sort of civil order in April and May, he was succeeded by Paul Bremer (from the State Department) as the highest civil authority, who now says that he wants to hand over power to an Iraqi government, as soon as possible, after the establishment of a constitution and the holding of national elections..

A governing council was duly “elected”. Although its president, Ahmed Chalabi, was an unreliable CIA informer and has been prosecuted for fraud in Jordan and two other council members have either resigned or been murdered, the idea of a council appears sound. As a precursor of a real elected government.

Points for the future.

1. History shows that a centralised Iraq, governing its 24,5 million inhabitants from Sunni dominated Bagdad, can only be held together by brute force. Therefore, if the state of Iraq is to be kept whole and governed by law and common interests, a Federate structure with considerable delegated powers of government to the Kurds (up to 20% of population) and the Shia muslims (50%) and the Sunni muslims (30%), including regional parliaments, must be a first option.
2. Following the peace imposed by the victors and by the UN, a regional conference (Syria, Jordan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, maybe Israel) should decide on armament limitations, border, water and pipeline disputes. The UN cannot continue to impose solutions. There is considerable educational value in face to face contact at international conferences between former enemies for a common benefit.
3. Although the government is entitled to maximum income from its main source of revenue, oil production, the creation of a State Oil Corporation (as suggested by the governing council) would be a most disastrous solution, like anywhere else where it has been tried, especially for under-developed Iraq. Instead concessions to private companies should be granted soonest after open bidding procedures, to explore, develop and market Iraq oil and help it regain its rightful place in the world (3 or 4 million barrels a day?) within 3 years.
4. Contentious agreements made by the Saddam government to be declared null and void, but any bona fide debts to be scheduled for re-payment out of oil revenues.

L. Wesseling, 3rd October, 2003.

