

Can Iraq survive?

The unfinished civil war.

War drove 2.5 million Iraqis out of their own country to the safety (and poverty) of Syria and Jordan. Few have returned. Similar numbers of “internal refugees” ejected from their homes by religious, tribal or criminal militias, are still sheltering all over Iraq. Hundreds of thousands of houses in Baghdad, Kirkuk and elsewhere are contested between the ejected old owners and new occupants with nowhere else to live. It adds up to nearly 20% refugees in a total population of 27 million. Continuing fights between religions and tribes, Arabs and Kurds, make the outlook for reconciliation and indeed survival of Iraq as a nation doubtful, in spite of improvements in security. Nor can elections, in which large population segments do not vote, help create the hard compromises necessary for a unified Iraq.

The civil war between Shia and Sunni groups was ignited in February 2006 by Al Qaeda dynamiting the golden dome of the Shiite Askarya holy site. In spite of all efforts for peace by the highest Shiite, Sunni and political authorities, revenge actions immediately began to escalate. Sunni tribes who had been fighting US forces in Anbar province since the fall of the Saddam regime were drawn into full scale warfare against the Shiites, representing 60% of the population of Iraq. By mid 2007 Shiite militias dominated the battlefields, of which the most important was Baghdad. “Sectarian cleansing” of neighbourhoods became widespread. By this time the defeated Sunni tribal fighters, horrified by the excesses of their former El Qaeda allies, approached the US high command with proposals for collaboration in return for help against the Shiite militias. The El Qaeda leadership had overreached itself and was betrayed by their former Sunni comrades, who needed US Army protection.

US General Petraeus promptly recognised the collaboration with the tribal Sunni leaders as a military game changer. He enlisted more than 100.000 “Sons of Iraq”, paying them 300 dollar monthly wages, whilst supplying all equipment and training. Petraeus understands that “money is ammunition”. The Shiite militias were duly fought to a standstill by combined US army/ Sunni militia operations and as a result the statistics on terrorist incidents and civilian casualties improved and a measure of peace returned in 2008. Open civil war ended. US military death rates dropped from 70 to 20 a month.

Old political divisions are perpetuated.

But these military successes came at a heavy price for the future political coherence of Iraq: The former Baath Party through which Saddam Hussein governed, banned by the Coalition Provisional Authority under Bremer in 2003, had to be partly restored. Baath loyalist officers from Saddam Hussein’s elite Republican Guards were recalled to active duty in the new Iraqi Security Forces. In fact the US started to behave rather like the regime they replaced, ruling the country through a privileged Sunni minority over the Shiite majority and demonising their Shiite sympathisers in Iran.

Political progress in Iraq not only lagged behind military progress, but came to a complete stop after the October 2005 approval of a National Constitution and the December 2005 election of the Council of representatives. In their November 2007 testimony to Congress general Petraeus and ambassador Crocker both fully

acknowledged and regretted their failure to initiate and promote the political solutions which alone can give hope of keeping Iraq together. Unfortunately, the necessary diplomatic and political initiatives were not made by the paralysed Bush administration for the rest of its mandate.

The central role of the army.

The Iraqi security forces (ISF), since the birth of the nation in 1921, have been arguably more important to the Sunni rulers of fractious Iraq than constitutional government itself. Even more so at present, since no Shiite dominated government has been tolerated anywhere in the Arab world, Iraq's Shiite majority government under Prime Minister Nuri Al Maliki is a threatened species with enemies on its borders and has every incentive to keep the Iraq Armed Forces (some 250,000 soldiers) and the National Police (300,000, at a guess) on his side.

The American military however put Sunni Arabs (only 20% of total population) and Baathists in charge again. According to the article "How to leave a stable Iraq" in the September 2008 issue of the Foreign Affairs Magazine, 80% of Iraqi army officers are Sunni; 50% are veterans of Saddam Hussein's military. The best units are 60% Sunni. All units are supported by American advisors. Even the Petraeus-sponsored "Sons of Iraq", a Sunni tribal militia, now want to be incorporated into the regular army. But Al Maliki (a refugee in Syria from 1979 to 2003 from Baathist death threats) cannot accept further decreases of Shiite influence, which would destabilise his government.

Similar moves have been made in the Sunnification of the national police force. American generals reorganised this "Shia-infested" outfit by firing practically all officers down to battalion level, replacing them with 50% Sunnis and Kurds. In the rank and file the Sunnis are again over-represented.

In spite of his dislike for Sunni control over the ISF, the Shiite Prime Minister Al Maliki made the courageous decision in March 2008 (without asking for prior US endorsement) to order the ISF to eject the Shiite religious militias from their control of Basra. At first, the ISF offensive stalled, despite substantial US and British military support. On 31st March a cease-fire agreement had to be humiliatingly negotiated by both parties in Iran where the supreme leader of the Mahdi Army, Muqtada al Sadr resided. Nevertheless, the Mahdi army evaporated and with little more fighting the ISF could take over Basra and later Baghdad. Thus, in spite of its Sunni leadership, the ISF was launched by a Shiite PM against Shiite militias as the true National Army. It should be followed, if a united Iraq is to be achieved, by the amalgamation of the ISF and the Kurdish armed forces.

The spoiling role of the Peshmerga.

However, into the three Kurdish provinces of Northern Iraq (under the "Kurdistan Regional government", acknowledged in the 2005 constitution) the ISF has never been allowed to enter. Inside it, the Kurdish army (Peshmerga), of some 200,000 soldiers, wields absolute power. They are paid for and nurtured by a different set of anti-Arab American military advisors since before the Kuwait-Iraqi conflict of 2001 and thereafter protected by no-fly zones imposed by the US led coalition on Iraq after the first Iraqi war. At least three big wars have been fought between (Iraqi) Kurds and (Iraqi) Arabs since 1945, with active involvement from Turkey or Iran (who also have

a “Kurdish problem”). The war of 1988/89 became especially infamous for the use by Saddam Hussein of gas against villages causing over 100,000 casualties. By reconciling the opposing factions of the PKK and PDK, the US has proven its considerable influence in the Kurdish government. Also, when the ISF moved into the contested Nineveh province in January 2009 and the Kurds reacted by sending in the Peshmerga, the Americans negotiated the military stand-off. But they failed to impose a political solution.

In a nutshell: Short of continued American military occupation, Iraq cannot exist with two regular armies and various other “religious ”and tribal militias. It needs one strong army to assist civil rule with a strong hand from the centre in Baghdad, or it will disintegrate and fall prey to neighbours Iran or Turkey. The army, like the military in Turkey, would of course rival the power of the federal government and sometimes even threaten it. The US should genuinely have promoted its representative composition and its central role from the start while they had the opportunity, instead of opportunistically playing separate military fiefdoms against each other.

The new federal government of Iraq.

A new Constitution was approved by a majority of one in a barely legal parliamentary vote in October 2005. The three branches of government are: the Executive, with a largely ceremonial President (Jalal Talabani, a Kurd) and a powerful Prime Minister (Nuri Al Maliki, a secular Shiite) in charge of central government and of the army, in the capital Baghdad. Other branches are the Legislative and the Judiciary. All conventional stuff;- freedom of religion in a democratic, multi-ethnic Iraq, equal sharing of oil revenue etc., all guaranteed in the uplifting prose you would expect from the sincere American and UN experts who helped put it together.

The federal state of Iraq consists of 18 provinces, three of which form a Region under the Kurdistan Regional Government. Although Kurds represent only 19% of the total Iraqi population, they have an ample majority in these three provinces and a strong presence in the province of Tamim which includes oil-rich Kirkuk. This province could not take part in the January 2009 elections, because its borders are still to be settled by local referendum. The Kurds, fearing that the hated Arabisation policy carried out by Saddam in Kirkuk might reveal an Arab majority for that province, blocked elections in the Northern four provinces.

The 2009 elections revealed a preference for the secular Dawa party of PM Maliki, which came first in the South and in Baghdad. Nevertheless, the Shiite party, of Muqtada el Sadr, which was not allowed to put up candidates because its militia links, retains a powerful brooding presence, whilst the Supreme Islamic council party (Abdul Aziz Al Hakaim) came a close second in the six Southern Shiite provinces. Their aims are: a greater Shiite religious influence in the South, and the creation of a Shiite Region to balance the Kurdish region in the North.

In the Sunni Western provinces too, secular parties favouring central government predominate. Sunnis living in these supposedly oil-poor provinces fear however that the Kurdish region in the North and a potential Shiite region in the South, both with proven oil, would make them the poor cousins of the new Iraq.

Overall the secular democratic current in Iraqi politics received endorsement from the people. Religious extremists are rejected or suppressed. Now Maliki could deal with the religious parties from a position of strength and promote secular Shiites into government and army service. Of course the Sunnis will punch above their weight as in the past, but the PM must gain their full acceptance of his majority Shiite government before being able to approach the Kurds with a “deal they cannot refuse”. On their side, the Kurds, without ever wanting to admit it, need the larger and more developed ISF to dissuade Turkey and Iran from armed incursions into their oil rich region. Finally, the US could help negotiate with Turkey and Iran the necessary border guarantees and Iraq’s unhindered access to oil exports through international pipelines or through the Shat el Arab to the waters of the Gulf.

OIL.

Iraq could influence the world crude oil price for the next decade. Even after many years of neglect and lack of exploration, (since the 1973 nationalisation of the foreign consortium operating the Iraq Petroleum Company,) proven oil reserves stand at 115 billion barrels (world no.2 after Saudi Arabia) and gas reserves at 112 trillion cu.feet. Renewed exploration could see the reserves surpass those of the Saudis and the official production forecast would give it a big say in the Organisation of oil Producing Nations (OPEC). According to the oil ministry, production could triple in six years.

Currently, oil exports of less than 2 million barrels per day provide 95% of Iraqi government revenue. Production is actually some 20% higher and the difference cannot be explained entirely by Iraq’s own internal consumption. Traditionally a profitable “black oil” export trail through Kurdistan and Basra has been operating and in present unsettled conditions it is no wonder that allegations of corruption against high Iraqi and American officials are rampant, putting the old UN Oil for Food programme corruption in the shade. A firm legal basis for oil operations is needed.

According to the constitution oil is the property of all Iraqi people to be managed by the federal government. Revenues should be divided over all Iraqi provinces according to their population, in consultation with provinces and regions and with due regard to regions unjustly deprived by the previous regime. So far so good.

In practice however, the Kurdish region with its existing oil production has ignored the constitution and federal government by signing dozens of sleazy oil contracts with Norwegian, Swiss, Turkish and American companies, as from 2004, ignoring protests from Hussein el Shahrstani, the Iraqi oil minister, who rightly declares such contracts illegal.

I was not surprised to read that even my old acquaintances from Hunt Oil, Texas, had signed an “illegal” contract with the Kurdish region; the last time I saw them at work was in 1974 when they tried, in vain, to muscle in on offshore concessions in South Vietnam. This time there was speculation in the media whether the US administration had actually assisted Hunt Oil in its efforts and if President and ex-President Bush had also been personally involved.

At a meeting in Feb. 2009 in Istanbul the Iraqi oil ministry invited selected international oil companies from all over the world to compete for “technical service

contracts” covering the development of 17 existing oil fields. Complicated bureaucratic bid forms (the higher the costs made by the contractor, the higher his profits) were explained and bids invited. A decision on those bids could be made by mid 2009. However, an outside expert report, made at the request of the Iraq petroleum commission (and also endorsed by the Kurdish Regional Government) has severely criticised the draft contracts as non-transparent and opening the door to improper practices. It would indeed have been simpler, quicker and more economical for all parties to offer the international oil companies simple production sharing contracts open to competitive bidding, but Iraqi labour unions are opposed to such capitalistic notions and the government lacked the guts to act without their support.

Time is of the essence. The five years long American presence has concentrated mainly on military “security” and fighting terrorists, Shiites, Sunnis, whatever, but has been hanging like a wet blanket over the political initiatives necessary to create a unified, viable and prosperous Iraq. In Big Brothers presence the Iraq government seemed to lack self-confidence and all sense of urgency. Now however, the running down of the civil war and the prospect of oil exports potentially doubling state income, offer a potential light at the end of the tunnel. The quick drawdown of US forces proposed by president Obama should kick-start the government into building up its army and embolden it to sign oil production contracts (however imperfect) for the whole country including the Kurdish region. If Iraq’s provinces, regions and tribes believe in a common and better future, they should be acting now.

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