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Iraq 2006 – Taking Stock

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On 17 March 2006 the EU Institute for Security Studies held a seminar entitled ‘Iraq 2006 – Taking Stock.’ The Institute had previously held a seminar entitled ‘Iraq after the Elections’ in February 2005 and together with the Council organised a seminar on ‘Federal Aspects of the Iraqi Constitution’ on 27 January 2006. Iraqi issues, notably regarding the question of Kurdistan, were also touched on at the seminar on the ‘Kurdish Issue and the EU’ in October 2005. It is now envisaged that a seminar taking stock of the situation in Iraq will become an annual event, where the progress and consequences of the US occupation will be analysed. The conference was well attended by international renowned experts on Iraq, academics, think-tankers, NGOs and EU officials and officials from member states. (See list of participants).

I - Future course of US strategy

As was to be expected, American and European views on the situation on the ground in Iraq and its consequences for further US strategy, were different. As seen from an American viewpoint, slow and moderate progress has been made. Three successful elections and the integration of radicals like Muqtada Sadr into the political game are quoted as proof that Iraq’s new democratic institutions are working. Even with regard to the Sunni insurgency, one speaker pointed out that there was reason for cautious optimism since they are ‘fighting and voting’, i.e. a change from using the bullet to resorting to the ballot-box could be possible. In any case, during the summer of 2004 the US administration reached the following consensus on the situation in Iraq and has amended its strategy towards the country accordingly:

- Any democratically elected government in Iraq will be profoundly different from the US.
- Iraq will have a weak government and a fragmented society at least for the next 10 to 20 years.
- The struggle to stabilise Iraq will take a decade.
- A break-up of Iraq is not the most likely outcome, but rather a breakdown of the state and of society, i.e. formally a state of Iraq will exist as an entity but without much cohesion or clout on the ground.

The President and his close advisers are convinced that Iraq has been 'through the worst' and that they therefore are doing the right thing by 'staying the course'. In their view, it will take twenty years before people will be able to appreciate their position. At home the battle to convince the public has already been already lost, even if the numbers of ground troops are being increasingly reduced and the 'body count factor' is not destined to play a dominating role in the future. The next president will have to decide whether to stay or not, however, he might be obliged to stay against his will.

But what kind of options does the US have? One speaker presented four options for the future, and in the discussion a fifth option was also raised:

- 1) *Staying the course*, which means basically a drawdown of US troops and a continuation of the US presence in Iraq. As a consequence, intense anti-US and anti-Western sentiment will persist. The US will have to continue building up the Iraqi army and to negotiate with warlords.

In the broader Arab world, the US will experience a situation similar to Gorbachev's in the 1980s in relation to Eastern Europe; once people could vote, they did so according to their own values. Hence, anti-American sentiments reinforced by the occupation of Iraq will pay off at the ballot box in many Arab countries.

- 2) *Immediate pull-out*: this would rightly be perceived as a devastating defeat – not just of the US but of the West as a whole – and lead to catastrophe. Iraq would slide into civil war, neighbouring states would become dragged into it and anti-Western groups would be emboldened.
- 3) *'Fuite en avant'*, i.e. taking action against Iran. Sunni Arab countries would be reassured and encouraged to unite under the US security umbrella, then a situation would be created where a confrontation with Iran is ramped up. This would of course have the effect of broadening the problem rather than diminishing it, if one takes overstretch of US troops into consideration; besides there would hardly be a majority in the UNSC in favour of it.
- 4) *Timetable*. This option would mean that the new Iraqi government sets a date after the US have declared their willingness to withdraw and the US also declares explicitly that it will not establish permanent bases in Iraq. This would force Iraqi politicians to deal with civil war under the US umbrella. This option would not only be a better way of coping with the insurgency but also ensure the US's global ability to act.
- 5) *Dialogue*. This option was brought up in the discussion but was dismissed as the chance for dialogue between the US and Iraqi forces was already lost in 2003, or at the latest in 2004.

II - The Iraqi Army and Drawdown/Retreat of US troops

US decision-makers too have concluded that only Iraqis, not the US, can defeat the insurgency. Therefore training the Iraqi army is a major priority for the attempt to stabilise the country. Currently the US has trained about 60,000 to 120,000 Iraqi army troops – numbers differ depending on the way in which troops are counted and whether one is downbeat or upbeat in one's analysis. The battlefield performance of Iraqi troops has improved too: for instance, not a single Iraqi unit has deserted or handed over their weapons to the party militias. The US are 'Iraqising' the war in Iraq in order to pave the way for their disengagement.

Some participants argued that this alone is not a winning strategy however, as the French experience in Algeria, where French forces could rely on loyal indigenous forces, shows. Besides, the Iraqi troops are essentially a light infantry force, as no decisions have yet been made about delicate issues like logistics, intelligence, heavy arms and armour, the air force and manoeuvre forces. Others pointed out that the Iraqi forces are 'less Iraqi' than party militias with strong ethnic and sectarian identities and affiliations to their parties. In this context, the fighting around Tell Afar has been cited as an example: the local Turkmen population of Tell Afar did not perceive the operation as being conducted by the US and the Iraqi army against Al Qaeda, but as US-Kurdish cooperation against the indigenous Turkmen population.

Yet the US wants to draw down their troops further by the end of 2006. From this date onwards the US will not have to draft reservists any longer but solely rely on the professional army, until it withdraws altogether somewhere around the year 2008. All this against a sombre atmosphere at home where the American public is growing increasingly impatient with the Iraqi situation and asking at what price the US should continue staying there. But leaving does not mean abandoning the nascent Iraqi army, which will be in need of US support for the next few years. Furthermore, as there will be no Iraqi air force in the near future, the Iraqi army will rely on US air support at least for the next 5-10 years. Needless to say, in order to communicate with the USAF the Iraqi army will need embedded US personnel as advisers and specialists for training, and for targeting purposes and similar activities. Whether these troops will need permanent bases remained unclear, in general speakers pointed out that the US is satisfied with the set of bases already in place in countries like Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar and throughout the Persian Gulf region.

III - The situation in Iraq

Speakers agreed that Iraq might slowly glide into civil war: although this is not inevitable it is unfortunately very likely. The deepening sectarian rift among the population has already had an impact on middle-class Iraqis who traditionally never bothered about the religious divide. Even they are quietly resettling in districts where 'their' community is in the majority. This phenomenon holds true for mixed areas in Baghdad, Basra, Kirkuk and elsewhere. And it is just beginning in and around Mosul. Even more worrying for the future of Iraq is the fact that sectarianism has gained legality after the elections and is therefore unlikely to go away. Another disturbing aspect is the fact that huge sections of the middle class are leaving the country, depriving the country of most of its brainpower.

At the same time, Jihadi-Salafists are organising a deliberate campaign against the Shias even when their 'torched earth' strategy has been criticised by high-ranking Al-Qaeda members like Ayman al-Zawahiri. Jihadi-Salafi groups have joined forces with indigenous Iraqis. Until now, Shias have refrained from violent retaliation. This was mostly due to the high moral authority of Grand Ayatollah Sistani and his Hawza (theological Institute) in Najaf. Regarding the Hawza, it is also worth mentioning that the bureau of Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei is becoming increasingly influential in Najaf.

Pressure against Sistani is mounting: on the one hand, Sistani's own tribal allies are putting pressure upon him to give the green light for the formation of tribal-sectarian militias for self-defence against Sunni *jihadis* and on the other hand special forces in the Ministry of the Interior, drawn from the Iran-funded Badr brigade, have already retaliated against Sunnis. By and large, the Shia parties are paying less and less heed to Sistani.

In this context, the emergence of Muqtada Sadr as an independent and powerful political figure is remarkable. Muqtada has become kingmaker in any Iraqi power equation. Even more, he has intensively travelled throughout the region and acquired experience in foreign-policy related matters. Yet Muqtada is not the only 'leader' of the Sadrist movement, the Fadhila group under Mahmoud el-Ya'qubi wields considerable influence and could become a rival to Muqtada in the future. In general, Muqtada is perceived as an independent power holder and any increase of his power base is viewed as being to the detriment of Iran – although he finds reasons to tactically ally himself with Tehran on matters of mutual concern.

With regard to the question of civil war in Iraq, one speaker warned that no conclusion should be drawn from the Lebanese or Bosnian experiences: the situation in Iraq will be totally different as regards tactical alliances among the essentially fragmented resistance groups. It would be simply impossible to negotiate with 'militias', since in most cases they are *ad hoc* coalitions of groups and even individuals, therefore in the event of a civil war violence would become endemic in Iraqi society. One speaker remarked that a fully-fledged civil war would force the Coalition to leave immediately. Another speaker suggested the following steps to prevent a civil war:

- Help forming an Iraqi government of National Unity, where a significant share of responsibilities would be taken over by Sunnis.
- Security-related ministries must be free of sectarian control. Therefore it is important to continue supporting the build up of secular, and at the very least non-sectarian, cadres in the security forces.
- Conduct a thorough revision of the constitution which should aim at a greater role for the Sunnis. This would include reviewing blatant contradictions, filling of loopholes and clarifying ambiguous language concerning federalism.

The US have on several occasions tried to negotiate with the insurgency although this has not yielded tangible results. With the arrival of ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, a Sunni of Afghan extraction, the US have definitely improved relations with the Sunni community.

IV - The Region

For the moment, neighbouring states play a rather positive role with regard to Iraq since all of them are in favour of Iraqi unity. Iraq's neighbours fear that the deteriorating situation in Iraq will escalate out of control and spill over onto their territory.

Encouraging neighbourhood initiatives like meetings of Iraq's neighbours have by now become rather worthless exercises: these have in fact simply degenerated into meetings between Turkey, Syria and Iran 'where they complain about the Kurds'. However, neighbouring states might change their posture once they are convinced that civil war has become inevitable or indeed has already started. In this case, a confrontation between the US and Iran via Iranian proxies like the Mahdi Army and the Badr Corps is inevitable, as is a confrontation between the Saudi-sponsored *ihadis* and the pro Iranian groups. However, the Iranians have already 'diversified their investment' in various resistance groups and will sponsor anybody who is anti-American, Sunni and Shia alike. Such a confrontation would at the same time become the 'clash of civilisations' that many fear and the emergence of a new generation of battle hardened *ihadis* would increase regional insecurity on an even bigger scale than happened in Afghanistan after the Soviet invasion. Needless to say, given its geographical proximity to the Middle East and ethnic composition, Europe will suffer much more from this development than the USA.

Kurdistan

Some participants asked whether the US would abandon Iraq and retreat to Kurdistan in order to avoid getting drawn into an Iraqi civil war. The US avoid doing anything that would elevate Kurdistan beyond its current ill-defined status as a 'region' in Iraq consisting of several Iraqi governorates. An independent 'Kurdistan' would by no means add to regional security as there is no cohesion between the two Kurdish parties. In fact some found it hard to describe the said region as 'Kurdistan', since there are no clear boundaries other than the old ceasefire line and the Kurds have already expanded their influence far beyond this line. Also there is no common government, let alone common security forces or anything else that would amount to a unified government. The US fear that once they gain independence 'Barzanistan' and 'Talabanistan' would go for war as they did back in 1996.

Iran

Iran's role has often been mentioned and some discussion arose as to whether Iran has been strengthened or weakened by the war in Iraq. At first glance, the US have removed Iran's fiercest enemies (the Taliban and Saddam Hussein); a second look into the matter however, reveals Iranian unease about the fact that it is now virtually encircled by the US.

The US and Iran have to some extent common interests in Iraq and even in the region as a whole – but these are too few and exist on too weak a basis to create much common ground between them. The Iranians, for instance, played a positive role when they supported the Iraqi elections – although it must be said that they did so

since they could be confident that their partners in Iraq would win. Iranian investments in Iraq and economic cooperation with Iraqi partners are other positive aspects of Iranian engagement. However, at the same time the Iranians are drilling in Iraq's southern oil fields and the US accuse Iran – though not necessarily the Iranian government – of providing crucial support to the insurgency (e.g. transferring information and know-how about explosives). The improved quality of improvised explosive devices (IED) was cited as proof of Iranian procurement. This all contributes to the view that the US does not see Iran as a status quo power. Hence, it is rather unlikely that Iraq will become the trigger for ameliorating US – Iranian relations, as these now revolve around the nuclear issue.

Hopes of overcoming the nuclear stalemate might be premature as for a variety of reasons a Libya-type bargain between the US and Iran is extremely unlikely. In this context, the question of a nuclear arms race was raised. Participants saw this as a minor threat since most states having such intentions would be unable to act on them for political and other reasons. The only country capable of entering a nuclear arms race would be Turkey but domestic (ecological and religious) sentiments in that country run high even against a civilian nuclear power plant. But more importantly, the Turkish military has clearly understood the risky and complicated consequences that would ensue if it were to go for a military nuclear programme; instead, the Turks are heavily investing in their interception capabilities. As regards a conventional arms race, it was argued that this would be lost by the Iranians even before it began in earnest – Iran's desperate quest for spare parts for aircraft was cited as an example of Iran's low technological capabilities.

Domestic politics too play an important role in US-Iranian relations, and two potential presidential candidates, Senator John McCain and Senator Hilary Clinton, are currently pressing the president for action against the Islamic Republic in order to have the Iran issue out of the way and dealt with by the time they hope to become president. One speaker also hinted at the mood in the US Army and US Marine's Corps, saying that whereas they are 'fixing' (*sic*) Iraq, the Navy and the Air Force 'are doing nothing'. He then added that 'Iran is a Navy-Air Force' issue. And since Iran has been built up as a global threat, US public opinion is certainly in favour of action against Iran.

Turkey

For Turkey, the undoing of Sunni Mesopotamia in the aftermath of the US-led invasion is tantamount to dismantling the 1639 Qasr Shirin Treaty between the Sunni Ottomans and the Shia Iranians. This treaty had for over 350 years balanced the delicate and highly politicised Sunni-Shia equation and formed a stable framework by which sectarian strife was reduced to a minimum. Needless to say, Turkey too is concerned about the possible spillover of the Iraqi crisis on its territory. Minor Al-Qaeda figures have already infiltrated Turkey from Iraq in the last few years and Istanbul suffered bomb attacks related to Iraq and Al-Qaeda in 2003. A breakdown of Iraq will have serious consequences as regards soft security issues like management of refugees and disruption of economic relations. Besides, Turkey's relations with the US were extremely tense after an incident in the Kurdish town of Suleymaniya in 2003. After this incident Turkey's policy towards Northern Iraq became more and more conciliatory, to such an extent that today it is almost friendly. This is due to the

fact that Turkey's business community and civil society today have a much bigger say in formulating foreign policy issues. Turkey has welcomed Sunni leaders from Iraq, but also Kurds and the Iraqi Prime Minister and Muqtada Sadr, and is clearly trying to play a constructive role favouring Iraqi reconciliation.

Yet relations with the US remain critical for two reasons: one is the US-Kurdish operation against the Turkmen population in Tell Afar, which in the end stretched the borders of Kurdistan from Duhok down to the Jabal Sinjar region. Another reason is what Turkey perceives as US reluctance to go after the PKK, which has begun a new campaign against Turkey. This in due course will negatively affect Turkey's tourism. Here one speaker made a point about Turkish-Israeli relations, which are going through a 'bumpy period' – not because of Ankara's welcoming of Hamas, of which the Israelis had knowledge in advance, but due to Israel's support for the *pêsh merga*.

Turkey's policy is in the framework of the new, consensually formulated 'problemsiz komşuluk politikası' a neighbourhood policy without problems. This 'policy of restraint' is closely linked to the internal reform process, which in turn is related to the country's EU membership prospects. If the EU fails to convince Turkey that it still has a chance to join the EU in the foreseeable future, the frustration of the political class would lead to stalemate in reforms and Turkey would come to rely again on its old, nationalism-driven foreign policy towards Northern Iraq. In the light of all this, some participants warned against employing Turkish support for any policy initiative towards a solution for Iraq.

Syria

Syria's alliance with Iran is not a regular alliance but a long-standing pragmatic cooperation driven by both countries' status as outcasts. This alliance has gone through various ups and downs and has matured towards a new triangular relationship between Iran, Syria and the Lebanese Hizballah. In Iraq, each of these supports different groups. Given the strained nature of US-Syrian relations, Damascus has hardly any other choice than to be in favour of having the US bogged down in Iraq.

Energy

The Middle East – North Africa Region (MENA: Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, Qatar, Libya, Algeria, Saudi Arabia and Egypt) accounts for most of the world's energy resources, both in crude oil and gas. The region has 83% of the world energy resources but produces only 33%. Most of the region's production goes to East Asia, especially to Japan and China, passing through 'dire straits' like the Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Malakka – both are essential lifelines for the global economy. Iraq's primary energy resource is oil. Iraq does not need new oil discoveries since more than 60% of proven reserves are not exploited (so-called 'future fields'). The Iraqi oil infrastructure has suffered extensively from neglect (both due to sanctions and mismanagement) and would need foreign investment in upstream and downstream sectors to be able to keep up with increasing domestic and global demand. The problem lies in the immediate need for investment: if major investment is not undertaken by 2010 at the latest, Iraq will be unable to sustain its exports.

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