

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE CRISIS IN IRAQ

Some Thoughts on the Crisis in Iraq, François Grünewald, In : Humanitarian Exchange, Number 24, July 2003.

As the passions aroused by the second Gulf war begin to fade and the media frenzy subsides, François Griinewald reflects on some of the lessons of the crisis

In the aftermath of the war in Iraq, airlifts bringing in humanitarian assistance have begun, in some cases backed by the considerable resources released by the US, the European Commission and EU member states. UN agencies, NGOs and 'specialists in reconstruction' have begun to flood in. Meanwhile, security remains precarious, and Iraqis are becoming increasingly frustrated. While it is perhaps too early fully to take stock, this article offers some immediate thoughts on the war and its aftermath.

The humanitarian context

At one time, Iraq's economy flourished, based on huge and cheap-to-exploit oil reserves. The war with Iran, which began in the early 1980s, marked the start of its decline; substantial portions of the country's resources were channelled into the war effort, and a generation of young men were sent to their deaths. Then came the invasion of Kuwait and the first Gulf war, followed by the blockade. Deprived of a normal economy, the country and its people were de facto dependent on outside help; meanwhile, an underground, mafia-like economy flourished.

Between 1991 and 2002, the European Commission was Iraq's largest international donor. That said, its efforts constituted no more than a fraction of the resources available via the UN's 'oil for food' programme. The programme was the logical consequence of Security Council Resolution 661, approved on 6 August 1990, which established sanctions and a trade embargo against Iraq. While a UN mission had pointed out as far back as 1991 the risk that people's livelihoods would be damaged by sanctions, it took fully five years before the programme was established.

The cumbersome procedures of the Sanctions Committee, along with those of Saddam Hussein's regime, had a serious impact on the delivery of aid. The situation in what was once one of the heartlands of civilisation deteriorated dramatically. Physical hardship was accompanied by violations of human rights, reprisals and torture. Nevertheless, an unprecedented level of financial resources was mobilised for the benefit of the Iraqi people. By the end of December 2002, over \$9.5 billion had been generated by the sale of Iraqi oil. The Iraqi government itself set up programmes in the 15 governorates of the centre and south of the country, under the supervision of nine UN agencies. In the three Kurdish governorates in the north, UN agencies implemented programmes directly in the name of the Iraqi government - leading to a strange situation whereby the UN was working for people in one area on behalf of their enemy in another.

The refugee crisis that didn't happen

When the bombing started in March 2003, many aid programmes were suspended, and refugee camps were hastily set up in neighbouring countries in expectation of a mass departure of Iraqis. The camps remained empty; no one listened to those who were saying, rightly as it turned out, that such a mass flight was the least probable scenario. This is doubly surprising given other, recent cases of disasters that didn't happen. International actors were expecting Kosovar refugees in Albania to have to endure a harsh winter in 1999-2000, but against all expectations the Kosovars returned to their homes in less than a month, from mid-June 1999. Mountains of tents and equipment were piled up in countries surrounding Afghanistan in preparation for another great exodus of Afghans, which again turned out to be a disaster that did not happen.

Aid and the aftermath of war

Although there was no major refugee crisis, humanitarian agencies still face difficult tasks, and the humanitarian operation will not be cheap. Once the war ended, the race began as usual, as NGOs and UN agencies, on stand-by for months in Cyprus, flooded in but to do what, to meet what needs, with what comparative advantage, and what expertise? Iraq had a sophisticated economic infrastructure, and high-quality human resources are available. As often happens, in the second week after the crisis the nature of needs changed and they became more complex. The 'pseudo-simplicity' of humanitarian emergencies has given way to the 'complex issues' of reconstruction, such as re-establishing water supplies, restoring electricity production and getting hospitals going again. The country has a tradition of commerce and, even before the war, used to buy in a large proportion of its food. How is access to food to be secured in an economy that has been paralysed by the sanctions just lifted, and by the direct consequences of two very destructive conflicts?

We must also consider the issue of anti-personnel mines and unexploded ordnance. These are found all along the old front line with Iran, not to mention mines laid by the various Kurdish groups on the approaches to the Turkish border and as a protective measure against possible confrontation with the Iraqi army. There are also the mines inherited from the first Gulf war, together with hundreds of thousands of shells, grenades and other ordnance, launched and forgotten by one side or the other. New technologies were deployed, far exceeding the skills and probably the equipment of grassroots deminers. Decontaminating the country will take years, and the Americans know this full well. In Laos and Vietnam, people are still dying every week, blown up by mines or cluster bombs.

The challenges of reconstruction are immense, not least because Iraq is so diverse. From the burning sands of the Kuwaiti frontier to the marshes between the Tigris and Euphrates and the mountains of Kurdistan, Iraq has a multitude of cultures; diverse forms of interaction between urban and rural areas and between nomadic and sedentary populations; and economic systems affected in very different ways by the sanctions. Subtle approaches need to be worked out in place of a uniform, homogeneous perspective.

Aid, politics and the international community

Alongside the humanitarian challenge lies the political one. As a consequence of the fraught environment in which the US and the UK went to war, serious differences between the key donors persist. In Europe, there was consensus on the need for humanitarian assistance. The reaction was immediate: ECHO released 21 million euros from its normal budget, and obtained a budget extension of /cm euros from the European Commission. Yet the differences between the main European states over the justification for the war threaten to hamper the coordination of assistance between the Commission and individual member states. Should this coordination fail, Europe risks further ridicule.



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Meanwhile, the establishment of the Office for Humanitarian Aid and Reconstruction, run by an American official, has highlighted the role of humanitarian aid and the relationship between NGOs and military and political power in this kind of environment. During an evaluation mission to Afghanistan in January-February 2003, I was told that the civilian and military operations launched by the US military through the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) were a 'test and rehearsal before Iraq'. At the time, the proceedings within the Security Council over Iraq had only just begun. The situation is in fact unprecedented: the US and its coalition allies have acknowledged their status as an occupying power as defined in the fourth Geneva Convention, and have announced that they accept the corresponding responsibilities. Given this, what dialogue will they be prepared to hold with the rest of the world and, especially, with the UN and Europe?

It is not just Iraq that needs rebuilding: international relations - and the UN in particular - need it too. It is difficult to imagine that it will be possible to reunite a divided UN on the basis of negotiations around rehabilitation programmes in Iraq. We find ourselves in a situation where the possibility of action outside of, parallel to or in opposition to the Security Council hangs over us like the sword of Damocles, permanently threatening diplomatic mechanisms inherited from the years after the Second World War. What will happen if no weapons of mass destruction are found? Resolution 687, passed on 3 April 1991, which contributed towards the tightening of sanctions, specifically refers to the destruction of these weapons. Can the embargo be lifted without reference to the issue of disarmament? Can the UN secure a meaningful role in the political and reconstruction processes? These questions have been central to the political agenda, and a 'gentlemen's agreement' has been negotiated. Yet the self-assigned prominent role of the coalition will continue to contaminate the humanitarian debate, while the issue of the whereabouts of the weapons of mass destruction will make the atmosphere of international relations pernicious for some time to come.

As the dust settles, we can only hope that, of all the casualties of these past months, diplomacy and humanitarian action as we know it are spared lasting harm. We can only hope too that the Americans have had time to reflect on the words of a strategist they know well. General Giap, the North Vietnamese Defence Minister, often used to say that it was easier to win the war than to win the peace. The Iraqi kaleidoscope, with its many religions, ethnic and political facets, could well prove him right.

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