

Peacemaking at the sharp end: Iraq before and after war

By Scilla Elworthy,
Created 2004-03-18 00:00

The anniversary of the war on Iraq falls on 19-20 March 2004. But the weeks (and even months) before this date mark another anniversary that deserves to be remembered: namely, the intense efforts of British and American organisations familiar with Iraq in proposing detailed plans [0] to the United States and United Kingdom leaderships to address the problems posed by the Saddam Hussein regime *without* military invasion.

These plans included:

- Extension of Unmovic inspections for weapons of mass destruction (WMD)
- Addition of a UN inspection force to monitor the constitutional changes, and moves towards a multi-party state, that the regime claimed to be underway
- Installation of TV and radio broadcasting networks to provide non-regime information to Iraqis
- Introduction of methods to protect opponents of the regime, and members of the Iraqi diaspora wishing to return – including electronic tagging, surveillance cameras and protective accompaniment
- Provision of non-military support to opposition groups
- Agreement and policing of a binding code not to supply arms to any faction, with penalties for supposed end users who resell arms
- Introduction of effective boundary controls on gun-running with severe and enforceable penalties, to prevent violence between opposition groups
- Substantial increase in human intelligence gathering, to provide accurate information on levels and quality of internal opposition.

These proposals would undoubtedly have taken longer than all-out military action to terminate the regime, and would not have been easy to carry out. But they would have resulted in few civilian or military casualties, little physical destruction, and none of the current bitterness and hatred for the occupying forces. Non-military support for progress to a multi-party state could eventually have produced an Iraqi opposition capable of government.

The book [1] *Cutting the Costs of War: non-military prevention and resolution of conflict*, with a preface by **openDemocracy**'s weekly columnist on global security Paul Rogers, is available from Peace Direct at info@peacedirect.org [1]

That judgment is based on close examination of a series of modern “regime changes”: how Ferdinand Marcos was removed in the Philippines (1986), how democracy returned to Chile

after Augusto Pinochet's rule (1990), how the apartheid regime was deposed in South Africa (1994), desegregation in the Deep South of the United States (1960s), and the "velvet revolution" in Czechoslovakia and across eastern Europe (1989).

None of these transformations "just happened". They were the result of years of capacity-building, tough training in non-violence and the steady development of a civil society able to come into possession of its own power. The tragedy in Iraq is that it was not even tried [1].

A weak and failing state

The result of this failure of imagination is that Washington and London have managed to create in Iraq the very situation they are most nervous about – a "weak and failing state" in the Middle East. Levels of hatred and resentment are boiling over, US troops are being shot and stoned, and *ihadis* have identified Iraq as the arena to fight [1] the US. They don't even need to target US troops directly; all they need to do is kill Iraqis to prove that the US cannot provide security.

Iraqis [2] tell the BBC that "the one thing you cannot provide is a normal life for us." The past two decades in Iraq, however repressive and fear-ridden, had stability. Now old ladies in Basra who can't get their pension from the post office any more have to queue interminably at the only bank. In Kirkuk ordinary people with severe family situations currently have nowhere to go and no one to tell – there is no recourse for them. They may have a missing relative, may have been raped, their house may have been destroyed, they may have no food, or a family member may have been unlawfully arrested. They queue endlessly to no avail. The result is that citizens are left helpless, seething with rage and frustration and then taking the law into their own hands.

In this context it is essential to understand and address the force of the deeply held, sometimes irrational and self-contradictory feelings and beliefs among Iraqis. They feel a strong sense of shame that their own armed forces did not manage to unseat Saddam, but an equally strong hatred and resentment of the US. This is expressed as wanting the US to "leave us alone" and simultaneously an outrage about "how dare they leave". The increased anti-Americanism links to people's feelings that there is no improvement in their lives. Many harbour the conviction that the US wants a failed state so it can take the oil. Many believe that Saddam connived with the Americans and is now being protected by them.

These beliefs are understandable in the psychological and social chaos created by the war, and the lack of control people feel over their lives. There may be links between the violence and the deep sense of marginalisation and powerlessness at a grassroots level in the region. In Iraq the psychological infrastructure has been destroyed, and we are not yet addressing the need to help people rebuild their shattered identities. This is not what governments know how to do, and yet it may be the most essential task.

What can be done now?

In Iraq today, it is actually easier to attempt visible, measurable projects like rebuilding infrastructure than the *real* post-conflict reconstruction, which means rebuilding peoples' lives. A glance at the website of the Coalition Provisional Authority [3] might give the impression that letting contracts is its main business. But helping people rebuild their lives takes painstaking care, especially when they have been through decades of living under threat, deprived of necessities of life, and repeatedly bombed. The situation in Iraq demands that we consider *non-military* ways of dealing with conflict. This means focusing on people, on human security.

One key reconciliation measure is simple and cheap: listening. When people are marginalised and furious as in Iraq today, on top of decades of fear and deprivation, a massive programme is

required to listen and attend to their needs. Liaison centres need to be set up all over the country where people with acute problems such as disappeared relatives, destroyed houses, rape or wrongful arrest can tell a trained interviewer what their problem is and get some help. Specific action could then be requested and quantified under certain headings, enabling the authorities to plan and respond to public need.

A record would begin to become available of the extent of need. People's frustration at having no recourse whatsoever would be alleviated. This approach worked well in Osijek [4], Croatia, one of the areas where "ethnic cleansing" had been most severe in the wars of ex-Yugoslavia. There, a small and determined group of citizens set up such a centre to help people rebuild their lives after the war. It was so successful that it swelled to employ 300 people and became a model for post-conflict reconstruction.

Sami Velioglu, a British Iraqi returning to his home town of Kirkuk in May 2004, is planning a pilot liaison centre similar to the Osijek, Croatia initiative; for more details, contact simonba@blueyonder.co.uk [4]

There are other well-tested "active reconciliation measures" which could be used effectively in Iraq today. Efforts to stir up religious hatred like the bombs in Karbala [4] could be countered by a widespread programme of bridge-building modelled on the experience of Lucknow in 1992. There, when extremist Hindus destroyed the mosque at Ayodhya, bloody rioting broke out across India; 900 were killed in Bombay alone. But in Lucknow, near Ayodhya, the main high school arranged nightly meetings of religious leaders who agreed messages of unity and restraint, which the students and their parents then broadcast with jeeps and loudspeakers all over the city. As a result no one was killed in Lucknow [5].

It's easy to be cynical about such "people initiatives" because they can appear small-scale, soft, slow – too "local". But the reverse is actually the case. The drivers of positive change for weak and failing states will *only* be found in the growth of civil society – in the emergence of community leaders, community initiatives and organisation, and women. This is what happened in South Africa, the Philippines, Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia – the same states where support for civil society initiatives led to *internal* overthrow of oppressive regimes.

Where do the weapons go?

A businessman in El Salvador – at the time the most violent in Central America, torn apart by a twelve-year civil war – was tired of seeing his trucks being hijacked at gunpoint. In San Salvador's cathedral, with the help of its archbishop, he founded a 'buy-back' scheme – where food vouchers could be offered in exchange for weapons, ammunition and explosives. This was so successful it eventually collected 10,000 weapons.

Such schemes have been extremely effective elsewhere: the UN set up an operation to collect weapons in Albania, and Nato did the same in Macedonia – both countries which were teetering on the edge of being engulfed in the Balkans' wars.

Iraq is evidently awash with weapons after large sections of the Iraqi army were demobilised with their arms. It might be useful and effective in such circumstances to set up a nationwide "buy-back" scheme on this model [5].

Moreover, other countries in not dissimilar situations to Iraq today have used third-party mediators to bring armed groups into negotiation. This might be useful in areas like Kirkuk [6] – the northern city where Iraqi Kurds, Turcomans and Arabs are locked in a potentially explosive contest for power. It might be recalled here that the Vatican-backed Community of Sant' Egidio

[7] managed (with the businessman Tiny Rowlands's help) the near-impossible in mediating between the bitter enemies Renamo and Frelimo in 1989-92 in Mozambique.

The big issue of course is the supply of arms. When Saddam Hussein was in power, western agencies, having sold his regime arms in the past, then fed various opposition factions with more. The embargo or sanctions solution against such over-supply of arms to areas of conflict rarely works. But they could work if three things happen: if supplier countries agree and police a binding code not to send arms to areas where conflict is imminent, and impose penalties for supposed end users who resell arms; if substantial funds are provided, possibly through a tax on corporate suppliers, to introduce effective boundary controls on gun-running, with severe and enforceable penalties; and if the five permanent members of the Security Council cut their arms exports [8].

The British blindspot

The UK, for one, cannot continue to be one of the world's top arms sellers without expecting these arms to be used in the cause of repression or injustice. There is a parallel here to the ending of the slave trade, when it was feared that giving up slavery would undermine the economy; it is now clear that ceasing to subsidise arms exports would actually have a net benefit for the economy [9]. The UK currently has the opportunity actively to broker an international agreement which could lead to the end of trading in one of the most deadly instruments of conflict: small arms [10].

The British ministry of defence (MoD) is right to emphasise the importance of conflict prevention activity, as most recently in its Defence White Paper (December 2003 [11]). Confidence and security-building measures do indeed help create transparency and trust. This emphasis however reveals a fundamental inconsistency in British defence policy: it is not coherent to vaunt effort "focused on countering the threat from the proliferation of conventional arms" when at the same time spending some £426 million to subsidise British arms sales [12].

The UK regularly achieves second or third place in sales of arms to developing countries, and policy appears to *follow* practice rather than *informing* it. MoD does not appear to recognise the inconsistency. Indeed, in a diagram to illustrate *Defence Relations Objectives* in the above White Paper, the "wider British interests" of "Support to UK's Defence Exports" falls right alongside "Conflict Prevention and Conflict Resolution". This inconsistency must be addressed before the integrity of MoD's *Strategy for Defence Relations* can be established.

Yet it has to be said that "non-military" does not automatically equate with "good". In Iraq, a decade of sanctions aimed at destroying military capability effectively killed millions of Iraqis by depriving them of medicines, food, parts for water treatment plants, and medical equipment. Sanctions systematically destroyed any strength the middle class might have had to oppose the regime.

Britain and conflict prevention

Britain's government, in the guise of former development minister Clare Short and current finance minister Gordon Brown, proposed four years ago that three ministries – the foreign office, the MoD and the department for international development (DfID [13]) – would work jointly on the prevention and resolution of conflict.

The allocated budget (at approx £120 million per year) is however too small to make a difference in the way we think about war prevention. Even when added to what is spent on peacekeeping, it is still only 2% of the UK's military budget. More spending here could bring

wider savings, for the simple reason that conflict resolution is cheap and cost-effective. The successful third-party mediation in Mozambique in 1989-92 cost approximately \$350,000; the gun return scheme organised by businessmen in El Salvador (1995-9) cost \$1.3million; and the task force set up in former Yugoslavia in 1999 to forge effective, united democratic opposition to Slobodan Milosevic cost \$240,000. Creative conflict prevention and peace-building brings results.

The importance of non-governmental activity

Techniques of conflict prevention and resolution have advanced dramatically over the past decade in the non-governmental world. There are now over fifty institutes in the UK alone developing, testing and costing these methods. The group I work with, [Peace Direct](#) [14], list these institutes in a new report: *Cutting the Costs of War: non-military prevention and resolution of conflict*.

At [Oxford Research Group](#) [15] for over a decade, and now at Peace Direct, my colleagues and I have been examining what works and what doesn't in terms of dealing with conflict without violence, and in getting rid of oppressive regimes. In the latest report we describe living examples of thirteen of the methods that *do* work.

The damage done to the fabric of society by any war has to be healed. Innocent people on all sides have been killed, and the resulting rage and grief, if not addressed, will foment revenge and future terror. Women who have been raped will go to their graves unable to forgive and forget. Children have been made mute from the horrors they witnessed. Other children struggle to manage stumps of limbs. Other children are yet to be blown to pieces by unexploded bombs. That's why human security is *the* issue of our time, and why war prevention is *the* coming science.

War prevention works on the same principle as inoculation for smallpox – it has to be done methodically, with proven vaccines and as a fundamental, properly funded policy. We want these methods to be enlarged and established, to be in conscious focus before any action is taken – so that every non-military option is tested *before* war is started.

Policy-makers need to integrate this agenda into their planning, to examine what the UK is doing that simply reinforces problems rather than finds solutions, and to allocate serious funding to other ways of managing conflict. Peace Direct is a new organisation set up to do just this – to collect and publish evidence on the value and cost-effectiveness of war prevention and conflict resolution in order to influence government policies and the allocation of public resources; to support those working in conflict areas to prevent atrocities and rebuild peace using non-violent methods; and to raise the profile of non-violent conflict resolution – to show how peaceful solutions can work, do work, and where and how they work.

Source URL:

http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-iraqi_war/article_1793.jsp

Links:

[1] <http://www.peacedirect.org/news/ctclaunch.html> target=_blank

[2] <http://www.asianews.it/view.php?l=en&art=498> target=_blank

[3] <http://www.cpa-iraq.org/> target=_blank

[4] http://www.xs4all.nl/~conflic1/pbp/2/6_csijel.htm target=_blank

[5] <http://www.cceia.org/viewMedia.php/prmTemplateID/8/prmID/143> target=_blank

[6] <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2004/03/4efe6eff-4960-440e-9fc2-3b3897a87e1f.html> target=_blank

- [7] http://www.santegidio.org/news/rassegna/2004/0313_002272_EN.htm target=_blank
[8] <http://www.caat.org.uk/index.php> target=_blank
[9] <http://www.saferworld.co.uk/presssubsidy.htm> target=_blank
[10] <http://www.iansa.org/about.htm> target=_blank
[11] <http://www.mod.uk/publications/whitepaper2003/> target=_blank
[12] <http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/programmes/armstrade.htm> target=_blank
[13] <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/> target=_blank
[14] <http://www.peacedirect.org/peacedirect/> target=_blank
[15] <http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/> target=_blank



Copyright © Scilla Elworthy, . Published by openDemocracy Ltd. You may download and print extracts from this article for your own personal and non-commercial use only. If you teach at a university we ask that your department make a donation. Contact us if you wish to discuss republication. Some articles on this site are published under different terms.