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What to Do about Iraq – a European View

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Table of Contents

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Introduction 1

Occupation dilemmas 1

Brahimi plus? 1

What to refrain from ... 3

Introduction

Before presenting a European view on Iraq, particularly from an EU country that has opposed the war, two preliminary remarks seem in order. First, despite continuing disagreements with the U.S. administration, there is no *schadenfreude* on the European side regarding the predicament the United States is facing in Iraq today. The legitimacy of and necessity for going to war (i.e., the alleged threat of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction), as well as the ideological assumptions that underpinned the Bush administration's decision for war (the missionary drive to spread democracy by force of arms, the conviction that Iraqis would by and large welcome U.S. occupation, and the idea of democratic dominoes) are still disputed in Europe. But no one is happy to see developments in Iraq spin out of control. On the contrary, there is a deep and growing concern that the transformation taking place in Iraq might be one from a totalitarian state into a failed state.

On government levels, no one in Europe advocates the hastened withdrawal of U.S. and coalition forces from Iraq. Not only would this almost inevitably lead to civil war within the country, but it would also sow the seeds for a regional constellation comparable only to that in South East Asia after the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam. Regional states would fight for dominance and feel no restraints in resorting to "self-help" policies by all available means.

Second, there certainly is a shared interest on both sides of the Atlantic in the success of all attempts to stabilise Iraq and to establish participatory, pluralistic government there. Maybe the European interest in such an outcome is even stronger than that of the U.S., given that Europe – under a dynamic perspective of EU enlargement – may at some point have common borders with Iraq as well as Iran and Syria.

Occupation dilemmas

How do we have to assess the situation in Iraq today? Three aspects seem to be important particularly as a basis for policy prescriptions. First, there certainly is "descending consent" in the occupation, as U.S. military officers have described it, or "occupation fatigue" on the part of Iraqis, in the phrase of Governing Council member Ahmed Chalabi. It is true that some progress has been made in terms of re-establishing electricity, introducing some economic growth, and even the restoration of an Iraqi police force. But many

Iraqis do not credit the occupiers with these accomplishments. Rather, they blame the occupation for the destruction that took part in the first place, as well as for the loss of personal security. In this regard, the United States and the coalition forces face very much the same dilemma that has confronted colonial powers in the past. The French occupations of Algeria and Syria and its spirit of *mission civilisatrice* may be a good example. The French authorities at that time regarded anybody who did not accept that mission as their enemy and undertook to defeat them. Yet, the harder the occupation forces hit at these enemies, the less consent there was in their presence and the greater became the potential for resistance.

A second aspect is that the majority of Iraqis is not on the side of the armed resistance to the occupation, of radical Islamists, die-hard elements of the old regime, or foreign terrorists that have been invited into the country as a result of the breakdown of the old system. Rather, whenever the Iraqis did get a chance to vote in local elections, they have preferred moderate, well educated and often secular people to represent them. There is no reason to assume that such tendencies should not prevail in a general election – and one need not therefore be too concerned about the results of such elections if they take place, as now scheduled, by the end of 2004 or early in 2005.

Thirdly and much more disturbingly, all necessary conditions for a civil war are present in today's Iraq. There are armed militias, whose control certainly is the responsibility of the occupation forces; there is a confessionalisation of politics and of political conflicts; and finally, there is a lack of state authority, and certainly of legitimate state authority. All this need not lead to a civil war – but similar combinations of factors have certainly triggered internal strife in other countries.

Brahimi plus?

So what, from a European perspective, should be done? To start with, we have to admit that all policies that could be recommended will at this stage be less than perfect. It would be illusionary to suppose that those who have warned the United States against getting itself into the present mess would have any ideal solutions. Rather than considering any quick withdrawal of coalition forces which, as outlined above, would most likely have catastrophic consequences, the US and its allies will have to find an orderly way out.

There should be a timetable for an end to the occupation, and the international community should oversee the quickest possible establishment of some form of legitimate government in Iraq. Much of this will be tried under the proposals of Lakhdar Brahimi. For an interim period, i.e., from July 2004 to the envisaged date of elections, the United Nations can certainly offer more legitimacy than the United States and the coalition. Within the next few weeks, it is therefore crucial to obtain a UN Security Council resolution setting the parameters for the eight months following the June 30 deadline for the transfer of authority to an Iraqi government. If at all possible, this deadline should indeed be maintained – not because it is an ideal date, but because scrapping it would result in the United States losing even more credibility and, more importantly perhaps, because Iraqis are already preparing for increased responsibility after this date.

A new Security Council resolution should contain a “Brahimi plus” plan that separates security tasks from a political mandate, i.e. from the oversight over political and economic construction in Iraq. On the security side, the Council should give a new, limited mandate to Coalition forces for maintaining order up to the Iraqi elections and the establishment of an elected government. The much-discussed suggestion of bringing in NATO is probably a bad idea. In Iraq and the region, NATO is considered as an extension of the US, not actually as a multilateral organisation that integrates the US into a largely European framework. A NATO mandate would therefore give the impression that the “West” was preparing for a long-time occupation of Iraq. Even worse, however, than putting NATO in command of the international forces present in Iraq, would be to put NATO in charge of only the Polish, or other non-US or non-UK sectors: Thereby, NATO would serve under an overall US command, rather than putting all international forces under the command of NATO.

Instead, what should be considered is the setting-up of a small but effective international security force exclusively charged with protecting the UN mission. This force might have a police rather than a military character. Countries demanding a strong UN role in Iraq, such as France and Germany, could prove their commitment both to the United Nations and to the stabilisation of Iraq by way of participating in such a force. Effective protection is vital for the success of a UN mission. However, its chief and personnel should not be forced to move around the country under the guard of U.S. tanks, giving the impression that they

are a mere extension of the occupation authority.

As indicated, a new UN Security Council resolution should separate the oversight of political and economic reconstruction in Iraq from the limited security mandate given to the coalition forces. The Security Council would have to install a UN High Representative or Commissioner. His tasks, according to the Brahimi proposals, would include appointing a caretaker government, convening a national conference, supporting the government, and overseeing the preparation for national elections in 2005. It may also be up to the UN to convene a new international donors’ conference immediately following the establishment of a caretaker government. This, also, would be a test for the international community to prove its commitment to rebuilding a post-occupation Iraq.

At the same time, it is essential to involve Iraq’s neighbours in the reconstruction process. Some of them, such as Syria and Saudi Arabia, have been playing a rather unhelpful role, as they saw their interests threatened by the emergence of a new, American-controlled Iraq. It may therefore make sense to establish a contact group including the six neighbours of Iraq, the Iraqi government and the four parties that currently form the International Near East Quartet (the United States, the European Union, the United Nations, and Russia). This would provide a forum for the discussion and co-ordination of matters of common concern, such as border security, terrorism, arms and drug trafficking, and organised crime. Locally, on ambassadorial level, the same group could fulfil an advisory function to the UN mission and its High Representative. The chance is that such a co-ordinating institution would transform Iraq’s neighbours, who are interested parties to begin with, into stakeholders in Iraqi reconstruction and stability.

A more controversial idea that should, nonetheless, be seriously studied is the recalling of larger units of the former Iraqi army. The CPA has partly moved into that direction by asking officers from the old army to return. While politically risky and probably coming too late, such a recall could make it possible to put a suitable number of Iraqi forces in charge of guarding the country’s borders, and of keeping the peace in certain areas – mainly the so-called Sunni triangle – whose inhabitants have been particularly opposed to the presence of foreign troops. Certainly, such re-grouped Iraqi army units would have to be placed under the command of the Iraqi Ministry of Defence, not that of the U.S. or coalition forces.

What to refrain from ...

Finally, there are three things the United States and its European allies should refrain from doing if they want to contribute to making the stabilisation and reconstruction of Iraq a success. Firstly, the United States should not try to make Iraq a model. While rebuilding Iraq and establishing a better system of governance may just be enough of a task, making the country a model for its regional neighbourhood would likely overburden the capacities of local actors. Secondly, the United States must not try to make Iraq a bridgehead or basis for any potential regional designs. Any attempt to do so – for instance to make Iraq the staging ground for the democratisation of a “greater” Middle East – would be the most secure way of inviting the country’s neighbours to undermine all attempts at reconstructing and stabilising it. Thirdly, Iraq must not be made a subject of transatlantic psychotherapy. While I strongly favour healing the rifts between the United States and Europe, the criterion for judging what policies are to be followed vis-à-vis Iraq has to be whether or not such policies help to further our common goals, i.e. the stabilisation of the country and the furthering of good governance. Curing the relations between, say, Gerhard Schröder and George Bush, or Old Europeans and Neo-conservative Americans, should not define the way to deal with Iraq.