



RESEARCH PAPER

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Editorial

The recent waves of insurgent attacks in Iraq, mainly led by Shiite Muslim cleric Moqtada al-Sadr's forces, have raised grave questions about the stability of the country. Last April was the bloodiest month for Coalition forces since the official conclusion of military operations in May 2003, with more killed in action than during the six-week war. But the most problematic development in Iraq today is the growing erosion of Iraqi confidence in the performance and intentions of the US-led Coalition. The Abu Ghraib prison scandal further contributed to the shattering of one remaining justification for the preventive war in Iraq – removing a vicious dictator from power. As the Coalition is trying to ensure a smooth and legitimate transfer of sovereignty to the Iraqis by June 30 deadline, the reality looks rather grim and the outlook for the distant future may be even worse. This research paper is not on a future NATO role in Iraq and does not intend to provide any kind of policy recommendations for the Alliance. Its aim is to study the general situation on the ground and to raise questions about the future.

What lessons should we learn from U.S.-led efforts in Iraq? What are the ingredients of success – or at least of staving off failure – in the country? What are the possible military and political options in the near-term? What questions remain open in the international relations debates generated by Operation Iraqi Freedom? Peter Faber and Carlo Masala suggest that one possible answer to some of these questions may lie in an "Iraqization strategy" that involves a greater role for local actors. The key to establishing democracy in a divided society such as Iraq is indeed to build effective institutions, including an independent judiciary and an internal security force. Seen from this perspective, Coalition forces will have no choice but to work with "the material on the ground."

On a related note, the only exit strategy from Iraq seems for the Coalition to now turn the reconstruction of Iraq into a multilateral operation that would be perceived by Iraqis as assistance by the international community rather than a military occupation. The recent United Nations Security Council resolution calling for the return of full sovereignty to the people of Iraq goes towards that direction and helps to clarify the status of foreign forces in Iraq. This new resolution, sponsored by the United States, Britain and Romania, endorses the end of the occupation of Iraq, the return to full sovereignty to the new Iraqi government, and the start of a political process that will result in a new constitution and an elected government of Iraq.

Yes, the road to stable democracy in Iraq will be long and full of pitfalls for Coalition forces, but they have no realistic choice but to remain engaged in Iraq. The alternative would likely be chaos and instability in Iraq and the Middle East. The U.S. wisely made a suitable overture towards former war-opponents – notably France, Germany and Russia – who also have a strong interest in ensuring that Iraq does not collapse into chaos. Enlisting support from other Allies to help in Iraq seems indeed more important than ever. Nevertheless, European and American leaders remain deadlocked over the deployment of NATO troops in the region. While Washington pushes for any role for NATO that might be achievable, other Allied countries want to limit that role as much as possible and rule out any broad NATO intervention.

Lionel PONSARD, Research Advisor

Research Paper

NATO Defense College
Collège de Défense de l'OTAN
Academic Research Branch
Via Giorgio Pelosi, 1
00143 Rome – Italie

Directeur de publication:
Jean Dufourcq

Assistante de publication:
Laurence Ammour

web site: www.ndc.nato.int
e-mail: research@ndc.nato.int

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The analysis below is the result of discussions between two Research Advisors of the NDC's Academic Research Branch. Despite the sensitivity of the topic, and without wanting to interfere in the political debate, the analysis is designed to provide "food for thought" on a difficult issue.

* * *

L'analyse qui suit est le fruit d'un débat interne entre deux chercheurs de la branche Recherche du Collège de Défense de l'OTAN. Malgré la sensibilité et l'actualité du sujet et sans vouloir interférer avec son traitement, je suis heureux d'offrir cette matière à réflexion.

Jean DUFOURCQ, Chef de la branche Recherche, NDC, Rome

Operation Iraqi Freedom: Lessons Learned, Ways Ahead, and Open Questions¹

Peter FABER and Carlo MASALA²

Was Operation Iraq Freedom (OIF) an optional or necessary war? Was it a natural coda to Operation Desert Storm, or was it an anticipatory act of self-defense? Unfortunately, bloated punditry, ideological "spin," and election year posturing have tainted the debate over these particular questions and other equally important ones. For example, what broad lessons might we collectively learn from the American-led Coalition's experience in Iraq thus far? What political and military options might Coalition forces pursue in the near-term? And what large, post-cold war questions remain unanswered (and unaffected!) by local events in the Middle East? The following Research Paper grapples with these particular questions. Its primary purpose is merely to stimulate thought and possible debate.

I. Political Lessons Learned (Working from the Past to the Present)

Truly effective lessons learned should make us uncomfortable. In addition to cataloging

our successes, they should challenge our ideological biases and assumptions. They should also remind us of what we neglected to do, what we did improperly or incompletely, and why. Given these criteria, analysts of the recent conflict in Iraq might want to consider the nine following conclusions.

Before delving into these conclusions, however, it is important to keep one important background point in mind. Operation Iraqi Freedom was not "all about oil," as reductive conspiracy mongers repeatedly argue. If that were true, the United States, for example, should have first liberated Canada, Venezuela, and Saudi Arabia. Familiar anti-globalist hyperbole, however, should not obscure an uncomfortable truth – after decades of involvement in the highly volatile Middle East, the United States has yet to adopt a coherent and sustained energy policy that will reduce its disproportionate dependence on Middle Eastern oil. If nothing else, Iraq might remind American leaders – yet again – that this need exists. Having made this general point, let us turn to some of the possible Lessons Learned thus far in Iraq.

¹ The views expressed in this publication are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NATO Defense College or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Les opinions exprimées dans cette publication sont celles des auteurs et ne peuvent être attribuées au Collège de Défense de l'OTAN ou à l'Organisation du Traité de l'Atlantique Nord.

² The authors are Research Associates, Academic Research Branch, NATO Defense College, Rome.



- Western leaders have wrongly embraced a dangerous and misleading cold war-era fiction. They typically express it as follows – “Our quarrel is with the regime, not with its people.” Now such an artificially “clean” distinction has its advantages. In an era of optional wars, it celebrates your omniscient and finely honed judgment – i.e., it posits that you will use limited wars by limited means for limited ends against only a small part of the body politic of an adversary. Unfortunately, such “logic” can also blind you. It promotes the idea that you can adroitly decapitate a state while leaving its society intact; and that it will continue to operate without marked interruptions and with its own set of psychosocial dynamics in place. This expectation, although it makes for good public relations, proved false in Iraq.
- In attempting to decapitate a regime, you must make absolutely sure you do not dismantle a state. Unfortunately, the Coalition did exactly this, despite the admonitory local examples of the 1991 Gulf War.
- Promoting modernity is not the same thing as promoting democracy. Trying to import the latter (an untried ideology) into a nation of 26 million people divided into warring subcultures is a questionable undertaking at best. This principle holds especially true for Iraqi Shiites, many of whom are determined to maintain a political culture marked by martyrdom and unchanging traditions.
- Barring new intelligence findings, Iraq did not deserve pride of place in the US’s campaign against transnational terror. In fact, terrorism remains a method or technique; it is not an opponent. That distinction primarily belongs to Radical Islam, which harbors an innate theological-political hostility not only towards particular US and Western policies, but also against *what the West is and what it represents*. Since Iraq was not an obvious example of this particular type of hostility, it cautions us against a growing problem in international affairs – the tendency to link unlike political phenomena together.
- In a globalized world, where there are no longer any irrelevant nations, you need to place your war plans and policies in a regional context. And because of this imperative, a primary political objective in Iraq should have been “to capture the imagination of the Arab world” (particularly when it comes to political and economic reforms), and not just to topple the Iraqi regime.
- Coalition forces in Iraq splendidly proved that they could conduct military campaigns of “bare sufficiency,” as defined by theorists of the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA). But if these cutting edge forces then have to pacify and control a country in traditional ways, they will mostly likely not be up to the task. This inability, however, is not just a question of inadequate numbers. It is also a question of roles – i.e., of deliberately tailoring different forces to perform specific RMA or constabulary tasks.
- The above conclusion points to a related question that is both unsettling but worth discussing, especially in these politically correct times – Is trying to control or pacify a collapsed state at all costs actually counterproductive? Is it better, despite the “do something!” pressures stimulated by the “CNN effect,” to let anarchy temporarily run its course, and thereby re-establish *authentic* political stability faster and more effectively? We must be prepared to at least consider the idea that trying to inoculate an entire country against “creative chaos” just may be unrealistic and unhelpful in the long-term.
- Ministries of defense should not prosecute wars and then have a disproportionate role in administering post-conflict environments, as occurred in Iraq. The bureaucratic benefits of this arrangement, particularly unity of effort or economy of force, are not equal to the political costs, which include a breakdown of democratic checks and balances and of consensus building.
- War and post-war strategies must be *clear, coherent, and stable* if they are to preserve public and allied support.
- Finally, there is the problem of strategic-level intelligence, which is a relatively recent historical phenomenon. This type of intelligence is *different in kind* from its operational and tactical-level varieties, which are much more “nuts and bolts.” As the arguments over Iraqi WMD illustrate, the handling of strategic intelligence is not necessarily ideology-free; it can be “instrumentalized,” and therefore requires greater political attention and sensitivity in



handling than more practical forms of intelligence. One result of failing to do the latter is that the Coalition did not anticipate the wide-ranging and *professional* insurgency currently underway within Iraq. This failure led to a security crisis that turned into a political crisis, but the aggressive discourse in the latter has been strangely quiet about a main actor in the guerilla war -- Iran. It is spending a reported \$70 million a month on activities in Iraq; at least 300 Iranian "media workers" in the country are reportedly members of Revolutionary Guard/Al-Quds intelligence units; and from 800-1200 members of Ayatollah Al-Sadr's Mehdi Army were allegedly trained in camps immediately across the Iranian border. Do such disturbing reports bring us, yet again, to a variation of the original question: Are we now inappropriately "politicizing" our strategic intelligence about Iran's role in the current insurgency in Iraq?

The above lessons learned are just the "tip of the iceberg." They may be helpful to note, but only if they point the way for the future. In this regard, some possible options for the Coalition are better than others, particularly in the near-term.

II. The Ways Ahead – Options for the Near-Term

What should we do to stabilize the political and security situation in Iraq, and to minimize the impact of an organized guerilla war against coalition forces? During the last several months politicians and academics have recommended a cluster of noteworthy options, ranging from a complete withdrawal of coalition forces to the "regionalization" of Iraqi reconstruction and security. In our opinion, none of these options – *for the time being* – are particularly realistic. They ignore too many "facts on the ground" and/or discount the broader regional context that also defines Iraq. Most importantly, however, *they do not focus on resolving Iraq's political and security dilemmas per se. Instead, they reflect and preoccupy themselves with internal Western debates over the "legitimacy" of particular ways and means being used at this time.*

- *Withdrawal:* Those who advocate this option claim that the Iraqi people would embrace it as a positive political gesture. This is undoubtedly true, but it would also leave them

to their own devices. Given the on-going tensions that exist between different political, ethnic, and religious groups within the country, a general withdrawal would most likely lead to widespread anarchy. Moreover, it would goad surrounding nations (including Iran, Syria, and Turkey) to influence developments in Iraq further, and/or to play an active role in the expected civil war that could follow.

- *Internationalization:* Those who promote this option offer their own bromides, including the expectation that the "facts on the ground" would improve almost overnight if the American-led coalition internationalized its mission. Such optimism conveniently forgets that large parts of Iraqi society, including religious and tribal leaders, see *all* foreign actors, regardless of their origin, regardless of their mandate, and regardless of their actual or perceived "legitimacy," as occupiers. They would continue to turn a hostile eye to security forces that most probably would be less interoperable, less coherent, and therefore less effective than the forces operating in Iraq today.
- *The NATO Option:* Whether and in how far a NATO option will figure in the results of its upcoming Istanbul Summit is unclear at the time of writing this paper. Nevertheless, in the same vein as internationalization, NATO's prospects in Iraq are also limited. Too many Iraqis and too many others in the Arab world see the Alliance as tainted – i.e., they see it as a cold war relic, as a mere appendage to the US, and as *the* instrument of choice for future transatlantic military interventions in the region. Seen from this anxious perspective, a NATO presence in Iraq would only heighten the current perception that the country is being occupied by Westerners. Alliance forces would be shot at just as frequently as coalition members are being shot at today, if not more so. There is, therefore, no reason to be optimistic about "UN-izing" or "NATO-izing" security in Iraq.
- *Regionalization:* What then about this option? Although using a regional coalition of forces has worked in the past (as it did in Kuwait in 1961, for example), it is not a viable option for today's Iraq. Not only do Turkey, Syria, and Iran continue to have strained political relations, but the US also sees the latter two nations as part of the problem rather than as part of the solution, both in Iraq and in the



Middle East. Therefore, as long as existing policies prevail in Washington, particularly in relation to Iran, the chances of stabilizing Iraq through regionalization are very low.

- *The Default Option?* If none of the above options are realistic in the near-term, what else can those operating in Iraq do to enhance security and stability, overcome political uncertainty, and minimize casualties? A two-part option *might* be worth considering. First, Coalition forces could re-deploy to unpopulated border areas in the Kurdish north and to the west and south of the Euphrates River. The activities of these forces could then shift from propping up and/or legitimizing the Iraqi government to 1) protecting oil fields and pipelines from guerilla attacks, 2) preventing the violence in Iraq from spilling over into neighboring states, and 3) indirectly pressuring neighboring states to suppress the activities of radical Islamic groups operating within their borders. At the same time, this *redeployment strategy* might be supplemented by a *Falluja strategy* – i.e., if we hope to prevent the outbreak of chaos and anarchy in Iraqi cities after the redeployment of coalition forces, we may need – as difficult a choice as this may be – to rely on local, tribal, and/or regional strongmen to maintain order. Giving these individuals the opportunity to police and organize their own areas may appear to be politically cynical, but it could actually increase the legitimacy of local/regional solutions that come to the fore, provided that they are backed by the most powerful tribes, clans, religious or political groups in the area.
- The above realist strategy, when reconciled with revised Coalition activities, could lead to a more appropriate end state – the “Iraqization” of the current conflict. The regrettable costs of this strategy might be temporary bloodletting and disorder, but every political and security solution that followed – including the possible *de facto* or *de jure* partition of the country; the temporary resurgence of a strongman system; or the takeover of political power by particular religious or ethnic groups – would be an Iraqi solution, and therefore have a degree of “ownership” and public confidence that could exceed the solutions currently being imposed from the outside. Subsequent Iraqi governments would therefore have more legitimacy than not, and fears that a Shiite-dominated government would be at the beck and call of Iran are unfounded. (In fact, we

expect Iraqi Shiites to behave as independently as they have in the past – i.e., they will cooperate with Iran only when it is in their interests to do so. We also expect them, along with Iran and Saudi Arabia, to reinitiate a struggle for sub-regional dominance, as they have before, and thereby reestablish a triangular balance-of-power system that will help stabilize the sub-region.)

To sum up then – We wonder whether a combined redeployment and Falluja strategy is a viable and unavoidable realist’s option for Iraq today, especially if other pursued options fail first. Such a strategy would regrettably involve a period of genuine instability and pain, but its long-term benefits would include 1) the Iraqization of today’s political and military problems, 2) a stable balance of power within the country, and 3) an eventual balance of power between Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia.

III. Open Questions Unaffected by Iraq

One interesting feature of the “Iraq problem” is how politically destabilizing it has been on the one hand, and how limited in influence it has been on the other. Yes, it has contributed to “big picture” debates about international relations, but many of these debates remain wide open. As a result, we continue to need greater clarity over the following Iraq-related questions and others.

- *Question #1:* What is the proper balance between realism and idealism in today’s international relations? More specifically, are revolutionary or messianic acts like Operation Iraqi Freedom appropriate in a partially globalized world? One can argue that ousting Saddam Hussein was a deliberate assault against the status quo of the Middle East, and that it represented an attempt to transcend the “band aid” approaches of the past, which tolerated authoritarianism, corruption, gross human rights violations, and a host of other political ills in the name of ersatz “peace” and “stability” in the region. Today’s moralists are keenly aware of this unimpressive record; they therefore argue that there is a place for large-scale acts of political-social engineering on the world stage. Realists, in contrast, continue to claim that such acts are just too destabilizing for our collective good.
- *Question #2:* What represents “legitimate” action in international affairs? During the Cold



War, questions of legitimacy were relatively limited and manageable. Now the concept is in a state of flux. Is the UN a source of legitimacy or *the* source? Can it be the latter in its present form, or are deep organizational reforms first required? (Reformers worry that members of the UN Security Council, by virtue of their membership alone, might be perceived as the ultimate arbiters of what is “legitimate” or not in international affairs. Is this an appropriate role for those responsible for the bloodletting in Tianamin Square, for example?) Yet another worrisome trend is the growing linkage between legitimacy and what the putative “international community” believes is right or wrong. Here a skeptic might ask what simple majoritarianism has to do with doing what is morally or even objectively right? Were Vietnam’s actions against Pol Pot (1978), Tanzania’s actions against Idi Amin Dada (1979), France’s actions against Jean Bedel Bokassa (1979), an alleged cannibal, and NATO’s actions against Serbia (1999) all illegitimate because they were not endorsed by a majority of the international community? Ultimately, a more moderate standard might apply here – i.e., we might adopt the principle that in today’s world *the pursuit of national interests must always and simultaneously coincide with the pursuit of common values and “a greater general good.”*

- **Question #3:** Is multilateralism by definition good and unilateralism by definition bad? And in turn, is one particular form of unilateralism good (the early opposition to regime change in Iraq) and another bad (actually going ahead and accomplishing the change)? In the largely trivial treatments of these questions by today’s mass media, there is seldom any acknowledgement that multilateralism, as history shows, is an inherently unstable organizational principle and/or system. Where are the passing references to the possibility that knee-jerk support for multilateralism might also mean unthinking advocacy for instability in international affairs? Furthermore, where are the speculations that unilateral hegemonic behavior might actually lead to greater stability, as repeatedly demonstrated by the Roman Empire and others?
- **Question #4:** Are the international laws, rules and standards developed over the last 400 years able to cope with the security challenges we face today? Can they cope, for example,

with the “unholy trinity” of suspect states, weapons of mass destruction, and transnational terrorists? What about states that will not or cannot prevent transnational terror from spilling over their borders – is the current rule-based system able to cope with that overt threat? And what about the growing importance of non-state actors, who obviously have different deterrence and containment thresholds than nation-states? In dealing with these questions and others, current discussions about the effectiveness and applicability of international law are also disappointing. It appears that the defenders of the status quo have set their initial defenses much too far out. They seem loath to concede that *at least some of the laws and rules surrounding armed conflict might need to be modified or updated*, perhaps through a new Geneva Convention. This is particularly true when it comes to questions of national sovereignty and definitions of self-defense.

Does traditional (i.e., inviolable) sovereignty exist today, or is it a fiction undergoing “death by a thousand cuts”? Some analysts argue that globalization itself, multinational corporations, international and regional organizations, transnational crime, and governmental-private sector corruption all compromise traditional sovereignty each and every day, and in unprecedented ways. And as already mentioned, what about those states that do not have either the desire or the ability to prevent serious harm from spilling outside their borders? Can those in danger from these dark forces defend themselves proactively, or must they honor traditional strictures on sovereignty?

The answer to this question obviously turns on how do you define self-defense. Article 51 of the United Nations Charter provides a strict definition because it always assumed that the UN would have the necessary enforcement mechanisms (i.e., dedicated military power) to back it up. But that never happened – the UN was left with the definition but not with the tools to enforce it. So how should nation-states preserve their security in what fundamentally remains a self-help system? With the threats that now exist, and with the increasingly complicated nature of sovereignty itself, do they have the right to pursue looser, “with doubts” forms of self-defense? This is a very difficult question, as are the other ones posited here.



Unfortunately, the imbroglio in Iraq has temporarily chilled the possibility of dialogue on this subject. Instead of jurists and policy makers trying to grapple with thorny legal issues, a backward looking retrenchment has occurred. Instead of possible adaptations and improvements, we have anti-war advocates instrumentalizing international law and filing nuisance suits against the “war criminals” who ousted Saddam Hussein.

- *Question #5:* In the future, who should be responsible for post-war stabilization and recovery, if not nation building? Should it be the military? Those who claim that troop levels in Iraq have been consistently inadequate for the tasks bestowed upon them seem to think so. But is their clarion call for greater quantity solely a response to the “facts on the ground,” or does it reflect, at least partially, an opportunistic attempt to satisfy unrelated institutional imperatives? A desire to keep ground forces as the unassailable focal point of joint warfighting, for example? Furthermore, why should stabilization and recovery not be the responsibility of civilian-dominated or mixed organizations specifically tailored for these particular tasks? And why would these parallel organizations have to be country-specific? Would they not be ideal tools to attach to the UN or even NATO? (In the case of the UN, the tools could represent a non-threatening half-step towards eventual military empowerment.)
- *Question #6:* Based on the above answers and other considerations, what should be the proper composition of future military forces and what should be their “tooth-to-tail” ratio? Should these forces be combined or interchangeable? What percentage of them should be “heavy” or “light”? What mix of quantity-quality should they have, particularly if the preferred option is to have a capabilities-based force that can mass effects in out-of-area operations, and that can perform a

spectrum of tasks, including regime change? NATO leaders expressly want this type of force, but Alliance members have been slow to convert their cold war militaries appropriately. What then will their future forces look like?

- *And perhaps most importantly, Question #7:* At least in the case of the United States, Iraq is a single element of a broader campaign against transnational terror. (Whether it is connected to this broader campaign or not is currently under dispute.) The burning question, therefore, is whether a tactical failure in Iraq by the present Coalition will seriously undermine what has been a strategic transnational success so far? Note: Despite the best efforts of radical Islamists, there have been no mass uprisings in the Muslim world up to this point, no Muslim government has fallen, and no government has turned and openly embraced the radical cause. Could this now change?

IV. Conclusion

This Research Paper highlighted specific lessons learned from the current Iraqi conflict, it explored possible security options for coalition forces in the near-term, and it raised open questions that require answers. More specifically, it argued that near-term security might have to trump democracy and other desired end states in Iraq. The Iraqi people now need peacemaking more than they need peacekeeping. To make peace, however, Coalition members and their partners may have to work with “the material on the ground,” which might include pursuing a two-part Iraqization strategy that accepts the involvement of local strongmen. This realist’s option, however, is merely a temporary one. The long-term fix for what ails the country must include different forms of “soft power.” Otherwise, the Iraqi people will not be able to create the homegrown governmental and social institutions that lead to the “ties that bind.”



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