

Iraq Adrift

Gema Martín Muñoz

General Director

Casa Árabe e Instituto Internacional de Estudios Árabes y del Mundo Musulmán, Madrid and Cordoba

Over the course of this year, the situation in the Middle East has not experienced any changes providing optimistic perspectives for possible future evolution. On the contrary, the situation is cause for concern, with a wholly unprecedented extent of simultaneous crises and conflicts in the region. This growing bellicose scenario is developing within the complex framework of a multiplicity of non-state actors (armed groups, militias and resistance movements of diverse social and political backgrounds) while institutional and economic processes have reached an impasse: no sign of political change or development processes can be discerned. Despair and frustration are gaining ground in these societies and their immense population of young people along with the professional elite oscillate between desertion (via emigration) and progressive alienation.

By the same token, the international community is also at an impasse here. US policies insist on the militarist option while the USA's image has deteriorated and fallen into unprecedented discredit in the region, even among its most trusted allies. Saudi Arabian diplomatic initiatives are not necessarily in line with Washington's policies. The European Union is divided between passivity and following US policies, at a time when

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the failure of the Pax Americana and its project to reorganise the Middle East offers the necessary opportunity for other powers to put the region back on course. This opportunity is being more decisively taken advantage of by Russia and China.

The effects of the so-called “war on terror” are manifestly deplorable. They are eroding human rights and creating a highly insecure world. Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International, in the *Amnesty International Report 2007*, asserted that “Through short sighted, fear-mongering and divisive policies, governments are undermining the rule of law and human rights, feeding racism and xenophobia, dividing communities, intensifying inequalities and sowing the seeds for more violence and conflict. The 'war on terror' and the war in Iraq, with their catalogue of human rights abuses, have created deep divisions that cast a shadow on international relations, making it more difficult to resolve conflicts and protect civilians.”

In the case of Iraq, the chaos and extreme violence the country has been experiencing since 2003 is aggravated by other factors that are spreading the conflict throughout the region. Confrontations between Sunni and Shiite militias are increasingly creating conditions of division that go beyond Iraqi borders, contaminating the entire region. Imbalances and discrimination suffered by Iraqi Shiites and Arabs in general should be dealt with through democratically-based processes of national reconciliation and never through the impositions of foreign military occupation that open the doors to historical revenge, sectarian opportunism and the lack of regulations under a Rule of Law established by consensus. The imposition of the autonomy and near independence of Iraq's Kurdistan region is facilitating the return of PKK activity in Turkey, with the consequence of Turkish military intervention this could entail. The lack of legitimacy, international legality and regional consensus in

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establishing said autonomy, imposed by the US and Great Britain after the Gulf War in 1992, has contributed to opening a Pandora's Box where there is no regional strategic plan instead of settling a national claim accepted by all. Finally, Iraq has become a school for new Arabic and Muslim resistance movements, feeding on radicalisation and exporting terrorist forms of action.

Another evident risk whose regional consequences would be catastrophic is Iraq's collapse and implosion. In fact, State structures hardly subsist and the government is formal but not real. In Iraq it is not a civil war that is brewing but an extreme fragmentation into resistance movements, militias and extremist groups acting in accordance with their respective demands and ideological parameters in a double war against the occupying forces and those not sharing their local or regional interests. A violent, devastating chaos prevails that can only be overcome by taking into account the most cross-cutting organisations, the one's with the most popular legitimacy and with an Iraqi outlook going beyond clan-like and sectarian interests. The ideal would be for these organisations to defend Iraqi sovereignty and the end of foreign occupation such that they do not adapt to the strategy of interested selection of leadership imposed by external actors. Nonetheless, movements such as that of Muqtada al-Sadr cannot be ignored in the search for a solution.

The Humanitarian Tragedy

We are all familiar to some extent with Iraq's political problems but are we aware of the scope of the human tragedy brought about by this conflict?

The growing deterioration of law and order has fostered crime, delinquency and abduction for purposes of economic extortion, raising indices of civilian insecurity in everyday situations to untenable levels for the majority of those residing in the country. The social and economic costs are extremely high: Iraqi unem-

ployment oscillated at about 30% before the US intervention but is now between 60 and 70%. Reconstruction is not progressing, both because insecurity and violence represent an insurmountable obstacle and because the funds allocated to this end are being diverted to finance the increase in military forces and private companies contracted to guarantee security for US personnel and Iraqi authorities. Moreover, in May of 2005, the first audit on the disbursement of the Development Fund for Iraq revealed the disappearance of significant sums of money, the double payment of contracts and manipulated accounting books. It must be kept in mind that said Fund is an enormous bank account where the profits from Iraqi oil sales are deposited, and contains the vast sums of frozen money from the secret accounts of the Saddam Hussein regime in foreign banks as well as the sum remaining from the Oil for Food programme once it was dissolved. The United States continues to retain control over the Fund and its management through the Central Support Unit under the US Embassy in Baghdad.

The health and educational systems have plummeted to the levels of pre-industrial society due to the destruction of infrastructures. UNICEF has estimated that hundreds of schools have been destroyed since 2003 and progressive violence prevents their reconstruction, the distribution of equipment and their regular operation. By the same token, environmental destruction is generating severe imbalances in the ecosystem, and the destruction of water sources, water purification systems and wastewater drainage systems are putting the sanitation and health of the Iraqi population at large at high risk.

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in camps, others taken in by relatives, friends or simply other people of their community. Some also “squat” in semi-dilapidated or abandoned public buildings. Nevertheless, this critical humanitarian situation in Iraq, far from remaining within the country, has crossed borders and is now posing enormous challenges to neighbouring countries and the international community. Another two million Iraqi refugees are distributed between Syria and Jordan, and some 250,000 have even reached Egypt. Before the Iraqi tragedy, the figures were already shocking, revealing the intensity of conflicts in Northern Africa and the Middle East: according to the United Nations, this relatively small region of the planet contains 47.2% of all the refugees in the world. Of this immense quantity of displaced people living under highly precarious conditions, Palestinian refugees comprise the majority by far. Today they are a social group numbering over four million human beings, yet they are wholly neglected by the media, politics and international relations. They are the dark face of the longest conflict in contemporary history, a conflict which the international community has proven incapable of resolving, though this means relegating a huge number of people to a marginal subsistence devoid of dignity and with no future, whose numbers, as a consequence of this political impasse, continue to increase, giving rise to new generations living in insalubrious, foul-smelling ghettos with an absolute lack of hope in the alarming social and political powder keg which the Middle East has become.

In any case, though the number of Palestinian refugees has reached four million since 1948, there is now a new wave of Iraqi refugees, who in only four years already number two million. The UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East) has seen its budget reduced enormously as the problem persists over time and becomes entrenched, and is therefore increasingly dependent on private or bilateral donations. Hence, today, Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan (with 1,780,701 refugees), Lebanon (400,582), Syria (424,650), the West Bank (687,542) and Gaza (961,645; in this case, comprising 80% of the total population in the Gaza Strip) basically rely on volunteer

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workers and on whether or not States or private institutions recall the existence of this neglected part of humanity. The emergence of two million “new” Iraqi refugees heralds a highly difficult budgetary and financial situation where international organizations will have a hard time handling this intense number of neglected human beings who are wholly dependent on them for survival. The capacity of host countries is quite limited, such that regional and internal conflicts may continue to intensify because refugees will gradually become actors increasingly filled with rage and frustration.