Iraq in 2004: Between Totalitarianism and Uncertainty

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The year 2004 was an important juncture for Iraq, forming a mid-way point between the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime on 9th April 2003, when American troops entered Baghdad, and the new phase which began with the Iraqi general elections on 31st January 2005. Many commentators described the polls in glowing terms, pointing out that millions of Iraqis had defied the threat of terrorism to vote in what was their first chance to do so for 50 years. Yet the elections, which were boycotted by most Sunnis, were above all an assertion of the new-found sectarian dominance of the Shia and the Kurds. For precisely this reason, some other observers have seen the polls as another step towards civil war in Iraq. The year 2004, it could thus be argued, marked the country's transition from a totalitarian past to an uncertain future.

This uncertainty manifests itself in general trends, of which the most important is the struggle between stability and terrorism in Iraq. There are many related causes for the country's present situation, including the war itself and the idiotic American policies which followed it. Particular damage was inflicted by the disbanding of the Iraqi Army, the policy of de-Baathification, the lack of sufficient Coalition troops and the absence of a coherent American plan for post-Saddam Iraq. Early on, Washington relied too heavily on its untrustworthy Iraqi allies. The fact that it received no support from other countries in the Middle East until relatively late in the day made matters even more difficult. International powers which had initially opposed the war were also slow to offer assistance.

In addition, the United States set itself some unfeasible goals. Its decision to combine the tasks of nation-building and establishing an American-style democracy in Iraq meant merging two objectives which would prove overwhelmingly difficult in a country like Iraq. However, excessive ambition alone cannot explain everything. We must not forget the historical repression of Iraq's religious and ethnic groups, which the long period of Baathist rule from 1968-2003 greatly exacerbated.

After Saddam fled Baghdad, the American Forces set about arresting leading members of his regime. On 22nd July 2003 they managed to kill his sons Uday and Qusay in an attack on a house north of Mosul, to the delight of most Iraqis. On 13th December of the same year the Americans detained Saddam himself, whom they found hiding in a hole in the ground. This humiliating discovery dealt a painful blow to the widespread nationalist ideology of manhood and virility. Despite its differences with the United States over the war, the United Nations showed itself to be flexible. The UN lifted its economic sanctions on Iraq and the whole world recognised the country's new status quo. On 13th July the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) met for the first time: all 25 of its members had been selected by the Coalition. Nonetheless, and despite the fact that the Director of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), P. Bremer, remained the leading figure of authority with the power of veto, the Iraqis now had a governing body which would help draft a new constitution for their country. International support was gradually forthcoming and on 16th October 2003 the UN Security Council unanimously approved an amended American text outlining the political future of Iraq. This resolution reserved a dominant role for the American Forces in the country, but it also called on them to hand over sovereignty to the Iraqis 'as soon as practicable'. On 23rd October some 80 donor countries offered total funds of $13 billion for Iraq, with the United States adding a further $20 billion: the UN and the World Bank had calculated that the country would need $56

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billion over the next four years. Things continued to move in this generally positive direction. On 15th November 2003 a timetable was drawn up for the handover of power to the Iraqis. The IGC announced that the Coalition, under American leadership, would transfer sovereignty to an interim Iraqi government in June 2004.

For Iraq, the year 2004 thus began with a mixture of promise and anxiety. In March the IGC agreed an interim constitution, comprising a bill of rights which named Islam as a source of legislation (though not the only one). The Kurds were also granted a degree of autonomy. However, the approval of the draft constitution, which was known as the Transitional Administrative Law, was held up by Shiite objections. These indicated the complexity of the relations between Iraq's different communities and the lack of consensus among them about what the concepts of nation and patriotism really meant.

Moreover, at the start of 2004 the spectre of terrorism was also looming. On 16th July 2003, only three days after the formation of the IGC, the American military authorities admitted that the attacks against their forces bore 'the hallmarks of a classic guerrilla-type campaign'. Yet Pentagon officials had until then been describing the attacks as uncoordinated violence by remnants of the Baathist regime. In May 2003 the catastrophic decision had been taken to begin de-Baathification and dissolve the army and the civil service. These measures had the effect of driving thousands of people out of their jobs and into the arms of the terrorists. The latter's activity increased enormously on every level, especially as the authorities failed to overcome problems affecting the water and electricity supplies and other aspects of Iraq's infrastructure.

The first major terrorist blow came on 19th August 2003, when suicide bombers destroyed the United Nations headquarters in Baghdad. The attack killed 20 people, including the head of mission Sergio Vieira de Mello. More than 100 others were wounded in the incident, which prompted several international agencies to pull their staff out of the city. The assault also bore witness to the nature of what became known as the Iraqi resistance: a kind of nihilism with no relation to any political consciousness or ideological programme. Indeed, at the same time as the most rational opponents of America's venture in Iraq were demanding wider powers for the United Nations instead of Washington, the terrorists directed their hatred at the UN itself.

That the 'resistance' was a sectarian and not a nationalist movement became clearer still with its next major operation ten days later. A car bomb in the Shiite city of Najaf killed Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir Al-Hakim and 90 other people near the Imam 'Ali Shrine, one of the Shia's holiest sites. Some people accused the Baathists of responsibility, while others pointed the finger at Islamist fanatics. Yet whichever of these two groups was to blame, they both comprised radical Sunnis unhappy at the ease with which power was being transferred to the Shiite majority. Moreover, they were putting up sectarian resistance not only to the Shia, but also to the 'Crusaders', even if the latter meant people working for humanitarian organisations. On 27th October 2003 suicide bombers killed 35 people and wounded hundreds of others at the headquarters of the Red Cross and elsewhere. The date of the killings (which took place on the first day of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan) gave them a powerful symbolism. Five police stations were also targeted: evidence that the terrorists were fighting the state's ability to organise its own security apparatus, knowing full well that this more than anything else would prolong the presence of American Forces in Iraq.

The resistance was soon demonstrating its ability to strike anywhere. On 2nd November 2003, in the greatest single loss of American lives in Iraq since the height of the war, 15 US soldiers were killed and 21 others wounded when the helicopter in which they were travelling was shot down. That same day, a suicide attack against the Italian army headquarters in the city of Nasiriya killed 16 members of the Italian military corps, two Italian civilians and eight Iraqis. What was remarkable about this operation was the fact that it took place in the Shiite south of Iraq. However, in the New Year terrorism was soon to deal a blow in the Kurdish north of the country as well. On 1st February 2004 twin suicide bombings hit the offices of the main Kurdish political parties in the city of Irbil, killing at least 100 people and wounding scores of others. Like the massacre of the Kurds near the Imam 'Ali Shrine, these attacks took place on an important Muslim festival, this time the first day of Eid Al-Adha.

In due course there were renewed assaults against both the Shia and the police. On 10th February 2004 a car bomb outside a police station in the town of Iskandariya killed at least 25 people; dozens more bystanders were injured. Yet this was only one attack, albeit a major one, among many such incidents targeting

police stations and army recruitment centres the length and breadth of the country. The attacks were gathering pace: on 2nd March 2004 there was carnage during the Arba'in festival, marking the passage of 40 days from the date when the Shiite martyr Al-Hussein died. On this day, one of the most sacred in the Shiite calendar, more than 180 people were murdered in blasts in Kerbala and Baghdad. The Americans accused the Jordanian Abu Mus'ab Al-Zarqawi, described as having links to al-Qaeda, of orchestrating the atrocities. Al-Zarqawi's star was beginning to rise in the firmament of international terrorism.

On 31st March 2004 four American civilian contractors were murdered in barbaric fashion in Falluja, located in Iraq's so-called 'Sunni triangle'. Falluja had been the first and most radical city to put up resistance to the Americans. The bodies of the victims were mutilated and then dragged through the streets of the town. As a finishing touch to this depraved ritual a sign was placed under the corpses which read 'Falluja is the graveyard of the Americans'.

However, 4th April 2004 marked the opening of a new front in the struggle against the Americans which the latter had not foreseen, despite the warning signs. On that day a Shia uprising broke out across several Iraqi cities, triggered by the young, the unemployed and those who had been dismissed from the Iraqi Army. Their discontent was the result, in one way or another, of the great demographic changes which had taken place in Iraq under Saddam. His regime had managed to repress any public expression of those changes, but the shortcomings and mismanagement of the American administration had only served to make these feelings more acute. In the ensuing clashes in Baghdad, Basra and Najaf more than 40 supporters of the leader of the revolt, the young and psychologically unstable Shiite cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr, were killed. Several Coalition troops also died. While the violence spread to Sunni and Shiite areas alike, it was clear that the two denominations would remain far more divided than united in their resistance to the occupation. The split deepened as the Sunnis began increasingly to condemn the Shia as infidels, target them in suicide attacks and denounce them for their 'collaboration' with the Coalition.

As Muqtada Al-Sadr's role was still marginal compared with the spiritual and political leadership of Ayatollah 'Ali Al-Sistani, it seemed that the conflict with the Sunnis would last for a long time. Amid escalating fighting on 6th April 2004 a laser-guided missile hit the Falluja Mosque, where several fighters had been hiding and firing on the Americans. Approximately 40 people were killed in the attack. At the same time there was no let-up in the terrorist operations against the Shia and the police. On 21st April 2004 a total of 68 people died in Basra and the neighbouring town of Al-Zubair when four suicide bombers targeted police buildings.

Two days later the new authority embarked on a wiser policy, easing the pace of de-Baathification and giving some former civil servants back their jobs. Furthermore, in what could genuinely be described as a colossal shift in America's Iraq policy, former Baathists with nothing to hide were permitted to return to their positions in the army and the teaching profession. On 30th April 2004 the American Forces began withdrawing from Falluja and handed control of security in the city to Iraqi Forces under the command of an Iraqi general.

However, all of this came too late: too much hatred of the Americans had accumulated, and the terrorists were ready to unleash a new wave of attacks. A mere day after the new policy was approved the story of the photographs taken in Abu Ghuraib prison broke like a thunderstorm. The images showed Americans abusing prisoners, using dogs to intimidate them and forcing them to simulate sexual acts. It was difficult not to see a racist, colonial mentality, as well as a pathological psychology, lurking behind the abuse.

The response, or at least what the terrorists claimed was their response, was not slow in coming. On 11th May 2004 a video appeared on an Islamist website showing the American hostage Nick Berg being beheaded. In this nauseating spectacle the kidnappers, led by Al-Zarqawi himself, were seen claiming that they were avenging the treatment of prisoners in Abu Ghuraib. This was the first decapitation in Iraq, and it was to be followed by several similar acts committed against foreigners in the country.

After the murder of Baqir Al-Hakim, the next politician to be assassinated was 'Izz al-Din Salim, who held the rotating presidency of the IGC when he was killed in a suicide operation on 17th May 2004. Once again there was a race between the politicians and the terrorists. On 28th May 2004 the moderate Iyad 'Allawi was named Iraqi Prime Minister and two days later he formed a government that was broadly representative of the Iraqi people. On 8th June the United Nations approved a resolution backing the transfer of power to the interim Iraqi government and on 24th June, two days before the official deadline, the transfer took place. On 1st July 2004, in

INTERNATIONAL RECONSTRUCTION FUND FACILITY FOR IRAQ

The International Reconstruction Fund Facility for Iraq (IRFFI) was launched early in 2004 by the United Nations and the World Bank to help donor nations channel their resources and coordinate their support for reconstruction and development in Iraq. The Facility has two trust funds for donor contributions, each with its own characteristics and procedures:

The *World Bank Iraq Trust Fund*, administered by the World Bank Group.

The *UN Development Group (UNDG) Iraq Trust Fund*, administered by the UNDG and other UN organisations.

TABLE 1 **International donations to Irak**

Millions US$	World Bank Iraq Trust Fund (as of March 2005)		United Nations Development Group Iraq Trust Fund (as of April 2005)	
	Commitments/ Pledges	Deposits	Commitments/ Pledges	Deposits
Australia	10.20	10.20	7.70	7.70
Belgium			1.32	1.32
Canada*	22.26	22.26	37.77	37.77
Denmark*			4.53	4.53
European Commission*	102.52	102.52	128.06	125.18
Finland*	2.58	2.58	3.89	3.89
Greece*	-		3.90	0.76
Iceland	1.00	1.00	0.50	0.50
India	5.00	2.50	5.00	2.50
Ireland	-		1.23	1.23
Italy*	-		15.88	15.88
Japan	130.00	130.00	360.95	360.95
Luxemburg			1.24	1.24
Korea	3.00	3.00	7.00	7.00
Kuwait	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00
The Netherlands	6.19	6.19	6.70	6.70
New Zealand	-		0.94	0.94
Norway*	2.20	2.20	7.01	7.01
Qatar	5.00	2.50	5.00	2.50
Spain	20.00	20.00	-	
Sweden	5.44	5.81	6.82	6.82
Turkey	1.00	-	0.20	
United Kingdom	71.38	71.38	55.54	55.54
United States	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00
TOTAL	**397.77**	**392.14**	**671.18**	**659.96**

* USD equivalent of commitments not yet deposited are estimated at operational exchange rates
Source: International Reconstruction Fund Facility for Iraq

an attempt to boost the credibility of the new situation, Saddam Hussein was arraigned before an Iraqi judge for the first time since his arrest.

However, the resumption of terrorist attacks drove the new government to adopt measures which could be described as authoritarian. Bearing in mind that both the Americans and Saddam's opponents had placed great emphasis on democracy in their campaign to oust the dictator, it is not difficult to understand how the terrorists managed to prove them all wrong and anti-democratic. On 7th July 2004 'Allawi signed a new law granting the government the power to impose martial law in areas of unrest. However, this step was unable to prevent the deaths of some 70 people in a car bomb attack outside a police station in Ba'quba, north of Baghdad.

Meanwhile there was some progress in political terms as it became apparent to everyone that the terrorists were targeting the Iraqi Shia more than any other group the Americans included. On 18th August a 100-member National Assembly was selected to supervise the work of the government. In the meantime fighting between the Americans and the Shia was intensifying. After three weeks of conflict the pro-Sadr mili-

tia was forced to abandon the Imam 'Ali Mosque in Najaf and the American troops also pulled back. This was a significant political boost to Al-Sistani, who had engineered the settlement, and one which would yield him further benefits in future at the expense of both Muqtada Al-Sadr and the American leadership.

Yet no sooner was there quiet on the Shiite front than another tragedy occurred elsewhere. On 24th October more than 40 new recruits to the Iraq Army were killed in an ambush in north-eastern Iraq. According to the police report on the incident, each victim had received a singe gunshot to the head. This episode was another setback to Iyad 'Allawi's strategy of replacing the American troops with local soldiers. Nonetheless, the climate again became more favourable to the American and Iraqi Forces when they succeeded in wresting control of Falluja on 15th November 2004 after a week of fierce fighting. In doing so they deprived the insurgents of the place which they had hoped to turn into their fortress: according to American military sources some 1,200 rebel fighters were killed in the operation.

While neither the insurgency nor the terrorist attacks came to an end, the storming of Falluja on 22nd November 2004 allowed the date of the elections to be fixed. On 22nd December as the polls drew closer, the American Forces suffered their greatest single loss in Iraq to date when 19 of their soldiers were killed in a suicide operation against a US military base in Mosul. Three other people also died in the attack and more than 60 were wounded. In the ongoing race between the killers and the politicians neither had much time for reflection. As 2005 began, a tape recording of Al-Zarqawi appeared on 20th January warning that the conflict with the American Forces could last for years. He also condemned the Shia and accused them of fighting alongside the Americans in Iraq while attacks on the ground were increasing. Ten days later the elections took place as planned, leaving one major question unanswered: did this mark the beginning of the end for terrorism, or the start of a new and more vicious phase in its bloody campaign?