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Library Note

Debate on 24 January: Iraq

This Library Note aims to provide background reading for the debate to be held on Thursday 24 January:

“To call attention to the position in Iraq and the lessons to be drawn”

It summarises arguments proposed by academics and informed observers expressly concerned with the “lessons” which might be drawn from the Iraq conflict.

A great deal of further information about the Iraq conflict relevant to the debate is contained in a number of standard notes produced by the House of Commons Library. Please see the Select Bibliography at the end of this paper.

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1. Introduction

There has been a vast amount written and said about the Iraq conflict and lessons which might be learnt from it. As such, this Library Note does not attempt to provide a comprehensive examination of the topic; rather it seeks to offer a variety of perspectives on the conflict by summarising a selection of articles from authoritative academic journals and the views of expert observers. The summary concentrates entirely on the “lessons to be drawn” aspect of the debate and considers only academic sources which are expressly concerned with this. It does not include an analysis of references made in Parliament and the press to the “lessons” to be learnt.

In its examination of “lessons” to be drawn, this Note does not focus on the arguments surrounding the accuracy and use of intelligence in the lead up to the invasion. Instead, it aims to inform debate about the reconstruction effort, the efficacy of military intervention and nation building.

The articles it draws on have appeared over the past three years, and, as such, it may be judged that events which have unfolded in Iraq since have overtaken some of the assertions contained within. The articles published in 2005 are summarised first, beginning with an assessment of the coalition’s prewar planning.

Full text hard copy of all the articles cited is available from the information desk in the Lords Library for your consultation. The books referred to in the Select Bibliography at the end of this Note have also been set aside at the information desk in the Lords Library for your consultation.

2. Andrew Rathmell, 'Planning post-conflict reconstruction in Iraq: What can we learn?', *International Affairs*, October 2005, Vol. 81, No. 5, pp. 1013-38

Andrew Rathmell, who served as director of policy planning for the Coalition Provisional Authority in 2003 and 2004, notes in this article that US congressional and UK parliamentary inquiries, as well as journalistic accounts, the personal accounts of former coalition officials and academic studies, have all offered criticisms of the coalition's reconstruction efforts, variously assessing the extent of prewar planning as well as particular aspects of the reconstruction effort (pp. 1016-17). He summarises the drift of the reconstruction analysis in the following terms:

Critiques of the coalition effort at nation-building in Iraq were prevalent even before the April 2003 invasion. Many criticized the intervention in principle, as well as the way in which prewar diplomacy and planning were undertaken. Since the fall of the Ba'athist regime criticism has increased, with even supporters of the invasion having been disappointed by mistakes in the stabilization and reconstruction effort (p. 1016).

While some commentators have argued that the coalition's reconstruction planning prior to the invasion was virtually negligible, Andrew Rathmell rebuts this charge, claiming that there were plans in place, and, as such, it is "the efficacy and appropriateness of these plans and processes that are open to challenge, not their existence" (p. 1017). Andrew Rathmell contends that, "Iraq was not a promising environment for achieving the goal of building a peaceful, democratic, free-market nation" (p. 1018). It could not be described as a cohesive nation-state, its economy was weak and its society had suffered decades of violence. The Iraqi state prior to the invasion, "although it gave the appearance of modernity...was not a strong state" (p. 1019). Moreover, the outside world was not fully cognisant of the condition of the Iraqi state.

Comparing the coalition's efforts in Iraq with similar missions in the preceding 15 years, Andrew Rathmell notes differences which, together, have made the reconstruction mission considerably more problematic:

1. The lack of a mandate from a multilateral organisation; the coalition was largely unable to draw on the resources and expertise of the United Nations (p. 1019);
2. The decision to choose the model of direct governance. While this model had previously been used in East Timor and Kosovo, "because of the lack of indigenous governance structures" (p. 1019), its adoption in "an urbanized, centralized, semi-socialist state such as Iraq brought with it the responsibility to manage a daunting array of day-to-day policy and service delivery areas, even before addressing questions of reform and transition" (p. 1020);
3. While nation building missions have frequently had to cope with high levels of violent crime and disorder, the mission in Iraq has had to deal with "a number of large-scale insurgencies, massive international terrorism and widespread, organized criminality" (p. 1020). As a result, measures to tackle immediate security threats have often usurped the longer term reconstruction effort.

In terms of the nature and extent of prewar planning, Andrew Rathmell argues that in 2002 the US and UK governments both carried out planning activities. However, the domestic political situations in the US and the UK "meant that these efforts were fragmented until late in the day" (p. 1020). In the US, differences between key figures in the Bush administration hindered preparations as did the fact that the Department for

International Development in the UK was being led by Clare Short, who was opposed to the war. Furthermore, Andrew Rathmell contends, the planning was based on questionable assumptions: Iraqi forces would not offer extensive postwar resistance; there would be serious humanitarian crises to deal with; the coalition would quickly be able to transfer civil governance to strong Iraqi institutions; Iraqis would “embrace the political transition to a ‘new Iraq’ and actively support democratization of the political system” (p. 1022). In fact, the reality of postwar Iraq was:

1. The absence (a positive difference) of major humanitarian crises;
2. The disintegration of governing institutions. The coalition “soon discovered that Iraq’s administrative, social and physical infrastructures were in a far worse state than had been expected” (p. 1024);
3. The emergence of insurgents and terrorists – “although a certain amount of resistance by paramilitary forces had been experienced during the invasion, it was not expected that organized resistance would be a significant challenge to the coalition or the new Iraqi state” (p. 1024).

In his concluding sentences, Andrew Rathmell asserts that Iraq “reminds us that the tasks of stabilization, peacebuilding and state-building are inherently extremely challenging” (p. 1037). Moreover, he suggests, “it may well have been that, with the international resources and time available, the stated goals were unachievable” (p. 1037). More broadly, Andrew Rathmell argues that:

It is becoming evident that while peacekeeping troops can have a rapid and direct impact on stability and development, international intervention is a very blunt and uncertain instrument with which to effect political and economic transformation and state-building (pp. 1037-38).

3. David C. Hendrickson and Robert W. Tucker, ‘Revisions in need of revising: What went wrong in the Iraq war’, *Survival*, Summer 2005, Vol. 47, No. 2, pp. 7-31

Hendrickson and Tucker question the thesis that the United States “squandered an historic opportunity to reconstruct the Iraqi state through mind-numbing incompetence” (p. 25). The authors acknowledge that many of the decisions taken by the Bush administration can indeed be queried. However, although the criticism of certain decisions does make compelling sense, “the overall tenor of the argument is very misleading” (p. 25). Critics from both the left and the right may have made perceptive points about the conduct of the war and the reconstruction effort; however, it is in fact “not so clear that different choices on the part of civilian or military officials would have led to a significantly improved outcome” (p. 9). Hendrickson and Tucker contend that:

The basic problems the Bush administration has confronted simply flowed from the enterprise itself and not primarily from mistakes in execution along the way. Even if a larger invading force had had an operational plan sensitive to the likelihood that anarchy would follow rapidly from the decapitation of the Iraqi state, it would still have been extremely difficult to prevent the large scale looting and rampant criminality that descended on the country. Even had American forces understood that they were likely to face a growing insurgency after the war, it is doubtful that they could have elaborated an effective strategy for eliminating it (p. 25).

As such, the authors conclude that “a realistic appreciation of the manifold problems that would arise from the invasion of the country actually pointed to the conclusion that Iraq ought not to have been invaded and ‘liberated’ at all” (pp. 25-26).

4. Larry Diamond, ‘Building democracy after conflict: Lessons from Iraq’, *Journal of Democracy*, January 2005, Vol. 16, No. 1, pp. 9-23

Larry Diamond, who served as senior advisor to the Coalition Provisional Authority in Baghdad (January-April 2004), elaborates on lessons that can be identified from the post-conflict reconstruction effort. He identifies the following key lessons:

Prepare for a major commitment;

Commit enough troops, with the proper rules of engagement, to secure the postwar order;

Mobilize international legitimacy and cooperation;

Generate legitimacy and trust within the postconflict country;

Hold local elections first;

Disperse economic reconstruction funds and democratic assistance as widely as possible;

Proceed with some humility and a decent respect for the opinions of the people in whose interest the intervention is supposedly staged (pp. 13-22).

Looking forward, Larry Diamond argues in his concluding sentences that it is critical that a reconstructed Iraqi state has the capacity to establish law and order, and until this is the case, any political stability in Iraq will be unachievable and international forces will be required to guard against a complete breakdown of order. And yet, he highlights the paradox whereby:

While fending off total chaos, however, the presence of these forces is also a constant stimulus to insurgency. Until foreign forces are fully withdrawn from its soil, Iraq will never truly be at peace. Such are the dilemmas and contradictions at the heart of the intrinsically difficult task of building democracy after conflict (p. 23).

5. Toby Dodge, ‘The causes of US failure in Iraq’, *Survival*, Spring 2007, Vol. 49, No. 1, pp. 85-106

Toby Dodge argues that Washington, in spite of having finally accepted in early 2007 a “necessarily pessimistic assessment of Iraq” (p. 86), has failed to grasp the origins of what he defines as the “Iraqi civil war”. The origins, he suggests, reside in “the complete collapse of both the administrative and coercive capacity of the state” (p. 87). The apparatus of the Iraqi state “ceased to exist in a meaningful way in the aftermath of

regime change” (p. 87), and it is the United States’ inability to reconstruct the Iraqi state that “lies at the heart of the Iraq problem” (p. 87). Toby Dodge elaborates:

Until the state’s capacity is substantially rebuilt – if ever – Iraq will continue to be violently unstable, with the population suffering the Hobbesian nightmare of lives that are nasty, brutish and short. Unless the United States can commit to the generation-long project of rebuilding the Iraqi state – and this seems highly unlikely – then Iraq will continue to be a place of misery for its population and instability for its region. This clearly is a defeat of historic proportions for US foreign policy (p. 87).

Toby Dodge, Consulting Senior Fellow for the Middle East at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, contends that the violence now besetting Iraq can be explained more by the collapse of the state than by “the ineptitude of Iraq’s new ruling elite or the supposedly trans-historical existence of communal antipathies” (p. 87). He asserts that “the entrance of US troops into Baghdad in the first weeks of April 2003 destroyed the Iraqi state” (p. 88). The United States did not have enough troops to control the situation and “after three weeks of violence and looting the state’s administrative capacity was destroyed” (p. 88). Moreover, following the collapse of government infrastructure, the process of de-Ba’athification “purged the civil service of its top layer of management, making between 20,000 and 120,000 people unemployed, removing its institutional memory” (p. 88).

Toby Dodge argues that following the collapse of state capacity, national authority is lost and civil society’s ability to achieve positive outcomes rapidly dissolves. In such circumstances, “people will look to whatever grouping, militia or identity offers them the best chance of survival in times of profound uncertainty”. The consequence, he asserts, “is a speedy and unpredictable fracturing of the polity” (p. 88).

Two related problems were effecting instability in Iraq: first, the “acute security vacuum” (p. 89) caused by the collapse of state capacity and the disbanding of the Iraqi army; second, “how to find Iraqis, after 35 years of dictatorship, with both the technical capacity and national legitimacy to rule over a country of 26 million people” (p. 89).

Toby Dodge states that if some measure of stability is to be brought to Iraq, then “a central government with a monopoly on coercion must be rebuilt with administrative capacity to give it legitimacy. There is, sadly, no shortcut to this end state; if it is possible, it will take many years and a great deal of resources to achieve” (p. 93).

6. James Dobbins, ‘Who lost Iraq? Lessons from the debacle’, *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2007, Vol. 86, No. 5, pp. 61-74

James Dobbins states that the concepts of pre-emption, democracy promotion and nation building have all been damaged by association with the war in Iraq. The former Assistant Secretary of State under Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush argues that these three policies should be re-assessed but not abandoned.

Pre-emption

James Dobbins asserts that over more than 200 years, the United States “has conducted dozens of military campaigns, only two of which were in response to attacks on US soil” (p. 71). As such, he asserts, “this record should leave few in doubt that the United

States will employ force to protect itself, its friends, and its interests without necessarily waiting to be struck first” (p. 71). However, any efforts “to enshrine this principle in publicly proclaimed national doctrine” (p. 72), only results in any subsequent use of force being more contentious and coalition building more difficult – “other nations will never be prepared to exempt the United States from the internationally recognised restraints on the unprovoked use of force” (p. 72). It is therefore necessary, James Dobbins concludes, for Washington “to drop ‘pre-emption’ from the lexicon of its declared national security policy (as the Bush administration has already begun to do) while leaving an appropriate degree of uncertainty in the minds of any potential foes about how the United States might respond to a mounting threat” (p. 72).

Democracy promotion

James Dobbins argues that democracy promotion, like pre-emption, “has been a component of US foreign policy almost since the country’s birth” (p. 72). And yet, he declares, “democratization is no panacea for terrorism and no shortcut to a more pro-US (or pro-Israel) Middle East” (p. 72). Moreover, he argues that:

...democratic governments in Egypt, Jordan or Saudi Arabia would be more hostile to Israel and less aligned with the United States than the authoritarian regimes they replaced, since public opinion in those countries is more opposed to Israeli and US policy than are their current leaders (p. 72).

U.S. efforts to promote democracy in the Middle East “should focus on building its foundations, including the rule of law, civil society, larger middle classes, and more effective and less corrupt governments”, rather than seeking “dramatic electoral breakthroughs” (p. 73).

Nation building

James Dobbins contends that “nation building also deserves to survive its failure in Iraq” (p. 73). He states that the US “should certainly avoid invading large hostile countries on the basis of faulty intelligence and with the support of narrow, unrepresentative coalitions” (p. 73). And yet, conflicts are not necessarily as avoidable as Iraq was, and lessons therefore needed to be heeded for possible future endeavours:

Throughout the 1990s, the Clinton administration slowly learned how costly and time-consuming such missions could be. In Somalia, the United States turned tail at the first sign of opposition. In Haiti, it set an early departure deadline, thereby ensuring that any improvements it introduced would be short-lived. In Bosnia, Clinton set an even shorter timeline, promising to have all US troops out of the country within 12 months. But if Clinton had not learned to avoid setting deadlines, he had at least learned to avoid keeping them. Only late in his second term did he finally acknowledge the open-ended nature of US commitments in both Bosnia and Kosovo.

It has taken the Bush administration a similar amount of time to learn that nation building cannot be done on the cheap (p. 73).

In conclusion, James Dobbins summarises his policy prescription as follows:

‘Pre-emption’ should be retired from the lexicon of declared policy, democratization should be pursued everywhere as a long-term objective in full recognition of its short-term costs and risks, and nation building should be

embarked on only where the United States and its partners are ready for a long, hard, and expensive effort (p. 74).

7. Philip Wilkinson, Associate Fellow, International Security Programme, Chatham House, Speech at Chatham House, 'The future of military interventions: The Iraq effect', October 2007

Philip Wilkinson provides an analysis of political military discourse since 9/11 and ruminates on what can be learnt from the intervention in Iraq. He identifies four main lessons:

...number one is that when you intervene in anyone else's country, for whatever reason, there will be consequences that will need to be managed; some of which will be legally binding and relate directly to what we can only really call nation building.

Second, if you do intervene into someone else's country, without a political and economic reconstruction plan that delivers improvements to people's quality of life, you will soon be confronted by spoilers who may well politically mature to become insurgents.

Three, there will only ever be a limited time window in which a high-profile international presence will be acceptable. Eventually, the indigenous population will object to your presence no matter what political creed you are selling, especially if it is different from their own.

Fourth, in any post conflict environment, the first requirement will be for security and the need to build the rule of law. The need to establish the rule of law and deliver access to justice at the outset of any intervention is paramount in order to deliver those human goals to which we all aspire. Unfortunately, the establishment of the rule of law is not part of the logic of war but of what we might call nation building or even Counter Insurgency or COIN (p. 4)

Philip Wilkinson argues that in his view the strategic control of nation building, even though it may involve "social, economic, rule of law and governance lines of operation", should remain "the preserve of today's politically astute General" (p. 5). He asks why Whitehall and Washington have only had "partial success" in developing policies for both Iraq and Afghanistan, concluding that:

Put simply the political military discourse necessary for the development of coherent and realisable policies and strategies is too heavily weighted in favour of political rhetoric at the expense of the ground realities, and this is because military representation at the highest levels in Whitehall has been diminished in my view below a safe level. In Washington and in the build up to the Iraq invasion Rumsfeld simply ignored the advice of his generals (p. 6).

The military, Philip Wilkinson contends, should be represented to a greater extent in the highest echelons of the Whitehall political security discourse than is currently the case. In addition, future success would also depend on the development of "a logic and language which is not predicated on the logic and language of total war but which reflects the true nature of today's violent challenges" (p. 6). This logic and language, he

suggests, “must not only be common to politicians and generals alike, but most importantly must balance the trinity of rhetoric, reality and resources” (p. 6).

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