



# Analysis Brief

Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East and Islamic Studies  
University of Peloponnese

## *Iraq: A development project in peril?*

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*The purpose of this article is to examine the current socio-political situation in Iraq and how it has been influenced by foreign economic plans. Its main argument is that the neo-liberal economic model, which has been chosen by the occupying powers is not beneficial for the majority of the Iraqi population. It is instead increasing insecurity and unemployment while simultaneously fueling the insurgency.*

US soldiers found no Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq, and evidence of a connection between the secular Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda never came to light.<sup>1</sup> The only microorganisms found by UN inspectors that could be deemed dangerous was all that was left from the military and technological aid that US delivered to Iraq while at war with Iran in the 80s. The majority of Iraqis are worse off than they used to be before the 2003 invasion; in 2007 the International Red Cross reported that Iraqis' status is getting worse. Medical personnel have been targeted in Iraq and half of the country's doctors have emigrated due to fear of ending up dead like some of their colleagues. "Iraq's health situation has deteriorated to a level not seen since the 1950s" as Joseph Chamie, a former director of the UN Population Division, has noted.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, malnutrition rates raised to 28% nationwide and 68% of Iraqis have no access to safe drinking water, a fact that led to the outbreak of cholera in 2007 in northern Iraq.<sup>3</sup> Food insecurity is also threatening the survival of the nation, with millions depending on rations distributed by the World Food Programme (WFP) or by the Iraqi government. Psychological problems for children are on the rise since they have to face death on a daily basis, and as many as 35% of Iraqi children are orphans.<sup>4</sup> In Fallujah, a major theatre of brutal battles between the US and jihadists, officials have warned women to avoid having children because of a tremendous rise in birth defects. According to a BBC report, doctors believe the problem is the highly 'sophisticated' weapons US troops used in Fallujah in 2004.<sup>5</sup> Cancer is also rapidly increasing among the Iraqi population ever since 1,700 tonnes of depleted uranium were used by the coalition forces in the 2003 invasion.<sup>6</sup>

The existence of a middle class, recognized as a force of stability by most scholars, is currently lacking in Iraq. Almost 40% of Iraq's middle class became refugees with no desire to return.<sup>7</sup> The UNHCR appreciates that 2 million people are refugees, mostly venturing to Syria and Jordan, and that 1.7 million are being internally displaced, making the catastrophe in Iraq one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world. Iraqi refugees in Syria and Jordan live under unhealthy conditions and extreme poverty is forcing many women into prostitution to survive.<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that the US and the UK, the two countries which led the war, accept only a tiny number of the Iraqi refugee population, forcing the rest to live in refugee camps in neighbouring countries.

Historically, Iraq is a country divided among ethnic and religious groups. The former regime of Saddam Hussein was able to hold the country stable through massive repression and by improving the living standards of the majority. The escalation of sectarian violence, after his fall, escalated to a civil war. Areas all over the country were ethnically cleansed by Shia and Sunni militias. Traditionally, power was in the hands of Sunnis, although the majority of the population are Shiites.<sup>9</sup> Since the occupation, this balance of power has been overturned and the government is being formed by Shia former exiles. Many analysts and human rights groups fear that the rapid and shallow 'democratization' process will lead to a majoritarian government with no respect for minorities and human rights. Scholars like Carothers and Zakaria have argued that Western pressure for fast democratization (in a divided, undemocratic country) without mean-

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# Analysis Brief

Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East and Islamic Studies  
University of Peloponnese

ingful and constructive dialogue could bring a government which would act even worse than a dictatorship, because it derives legitimacy from the elections.<sup>10</sup> From March 2003 until June 2004, the country was ruled by the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority. Quite strikingly, in the midst of chaos in June 2004, an Iraqi transitional government was formed in order to establish a new constitution. However, the ground rules and the economic model that Iraq should follow was predetermined by the occupying powers.

In the process of democratization, dialogue concerning past divisions is necessary. For Iraq this was not an option. From the start of the war, the US and its allies were dependent on the aid of local militias. Even before the war, CIA and Special Forces trained Kurdish militias in the north of the country so that they could form part of the northern front when the war started a few months later. Moreover, Shia exiles and militias, as David Ucko argues, took over Iraq's fledging forces and government, while at the same time excluding the Sunnis, who joined the insurgency.<sup>11</sup> Bremer, the Coalition Provisional Authority head, believed that the former regime elements needed to be punished rather than integrated. There are reports that Sunnis were being abducted while in hospital beds, and the Iraqi Ministry of Health has been accused of trying to exterminate Sunnis.<sup>12</sup> Iraq held its third elections in March 7th 2010. Although there were reports of violence, these were the most open and free elections in the modern history of Iraq. At first glance, the outcome of the elections can be described as positive for the future of Iraq. Al-Iraqiyya, which claimed a slight victory, ran on a nationalist platform and has a more consistent anti-sectarian perspective than most of its rivals. The party's head is the secular Shiite politician Iyad Allawi.<sup>13</sup> His victory does not necessarily mean that he will automatically become prime minister, because of the narrow margin, which could be a threat to the stability of the country. Al Maliki, the current Prime Minister, announced that he will not accept the results which gave his 'State of Law Coalition' 89 seats compared to Allawi's 91 seats in the Iraqi Parliament. The government that will be formed by these elections will be the first to rule after the departure of US troops, which will supposedly take place by the end of 2011. It is crucial for the new government to derive legitimacy from all groups in Iraq, as concerns are being raised about democracy in the country.

A fact that draws the attention in these elections is the decision of Iraq's Electoral Commission to disqualify 500 (mostly Sunni) candidates from running in the polls because of 'links' with the Baath party. Human Rights Watch (HRW) claims that the Commission did not provide even a minimal level of transparency about its decision.<sup>14</sup> In the previous elections (2005), most Sunnis boycotted the process. These Sunni exclusions are alarming; the political future of Iraq depends on how the Sunnis, which is the group that leads the insurgency, see their status in the country. As long as they see themselves excluded from the political and economic life of Iraq, peace and democracy will never become a reality. The current prospects are not hopeful, since most Sunnis find themselves unemployed and their politicians disqualified.<sup>15</sup> In recent months, officials started a campaign against publishers and the media. HRW reports that journalists were detained for hours while others were beaten.<sup>16</sup> On the day of the elections many journalists were denied access to the polls and few days later, the BBC started reporting local accusation of fraud in vote counting.<sup>17</sup>

Ethnicity is another factor of division in the country, with the most important issue being that of the Kurdish minority in northern Iraq, which has for so long fought for autonomy from the predominantly Arab country. Saddam's long efforts to 'Arabise' northern Iraq are being reversed. Thousands of Kurds have been pushed into lands of Arabs and forced to head to the refugee camps. The conflict is centred on disputed territories, especially Kirkuk, which not only hosts a mix of populations -Arabs, Kurds, Turkomans- but also contains reserves of oil and gas. Tensions have risen, leading Kurdish militias (Peshmergas) and the Iraqi army to line up in opposing formations.<sup>18</sup> The longstanding worries of Turkey that northern Iraq is being used as a safe haven for PKK fighters and that refugee camps are being used as Kurdish Rebel Bases can destabilize the area even more. The last invasion of the Turkish military in northern Iraq took place on February 2008<sup>19</sup>; but the role of Turkey becomes more complicated if we take economics into



# Analysis Brief

Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East and Islamic Studies  
University of Peloponnese

consideration. Turkey is Iraq's largest trading partner with the trade volume reaching US \$7 billion in 2009, a 58% increase from 2008.<sup>20</sup> Trade between the two countries is expected to reach US \$20 billion by 2011. Thus the great prosperity in northern Iraq is Turkish in its origin with about 80% of foreign investment in Kurdistan coming from Turkey.<sup>21</sup> Talks have started between the political leadership of the two countries for an establishment of a free trade zone. Taking into consideration the economic facts, the possibilities of an all-out armed conflict may be minimal. Turkey has clearly stated that any future military operation in northern Iraq will have as an objective to eliminate PKK fighters, especially in the Mahmur Refugee camp. On the other side, the Kurdish Peshmerga fighters have claimed that if Kurdish civilians are targeted, then they will counter attack against the Turkish Military.

Islamic fundamentalism in Iraq is on the increase and people who pay the price are minorities and women. Al Qaeda started operations in Iraq after the invasion.<sup>22</sup> Iraq had terrorist groups even before the war, but they were not successful, since the former regime was successful in oppressing them.<sup>23</sup> As many as 133 women were killed in the city of Basra alone in the 2006, 79 for violation of Islamic teachings and 47 due to honour killings, according to the UN agency OCHA.<sup>24</sup> In Sulaymaniyah there were 400 cases of burning women. All over Iraq beheadings, stoning, rapes, abduction, genital mutilation, trafficking and child abuse are on the increase.<sup>25</sup>

The general violence that followed the invasion is disrupting life in all its aspects. Looting of state enterprises and houses has left the country in ruins. Umm Sheyma is an Iraqi grandmother who talks for the past with nostalgia: "things have changed after the fall of Saddam because of explosions and kidnappings". Many people in Iraq miss the old more stable way of living. It is no doubt that under the previous regime the majority of Iraqis enjoyed higher living standards due to security, employment and social services; in the 70s Iraq provided social services to its citizens which bypassed all other Middle Eastern countries and the Iraqi economy was state-led. The government established successful campaigns in order to eliminate illiteracy, granted free hospitalization to everyone and gave subsidies to farmers. The Baathist regime adopted the western legal system, and achievements in relation to health earned Saddam Hussein an award from UNESCO. The economy provided jobs not only to the Iraqis, but two million people also arrived from other Arab countries and even Yugoslavia to meet the growing demand for labour.<sup>26</sup> Currently, Iraq is ranked 6th in the Failed State Index for 2009; this figure is even worse than Afghanistan, a country which has been in a state of war for 20 years.<sup>27</sup>

The reconstruction of Iraq has been disrupted due to attacks against projects, rampant corruption and poor coordination among international agencies and local communities.<sup>28</sup> Funding for reconstruction began with the creation of the Iraq Relief and Reconstruction Fund (IRRF) in April 2003, managed and funded by the US. Funds were mostly distributed among private American firms which had connections with the Pentagon or with the US administration. This raised concerns and objections because many of the development projects were handed to US contractors who employed cheaper foreign workers mostly from East Asia. Thus, even though Iraq is facing an unemployment rate up to 65%<sup>29</sup>, the private contractors chose to bring workers from Asia in order to save costs.<sup>30</sup> The development agents have also been blamed of seizing large amount of US tax dollars and Iraqi revenues. The sum of money that has been 'lost/misused' according to one account is as high as US \$8.8 billion.<sup>31</sup> The press reported stories of US soldiers gambling money in Philippines that belonged to Iraq, or of Iraqis dying in a hospital elevator that had been certified as safe.<sup>32</sup> The Iraqi government is unable to demand the return of its stolen wealth because of a law passed by the CPA that gave civilian contractors in Iraq immunity from all Iraqi jurisdictions.<sup>33</sup> The *Washington Post* reported that the reconstruction would have been much more efficient and inexpensive if more contracts were granted to local Iraqi firms. The Iraqi governing council has claimed that paying Iraqi companies to rebuild Iraq instead of American ones would save American tax payers 90% of the costs.<sup>34</sup> The reconstruction of Iraq has therefore been blamed of increasing unemployment for Iraqis, rather than decreasing it.



# Analysis Brief

Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East and Islamic Studies  
University of Peloponnese

Following the humanitarian catastrophe, many journalists and scholars started to blame the Bush administration for not having a plan for Iraq. In Klein's words "the blame rests with the plan itself, and the extraordinary violent ideology upon which it is based."<sup>35</sup> The plan was to open up Iraq to the world market. Thus, a country that for so long had a state-led economy was forced in one day to be redeemed from its past. As Bremer stated in the early days of the war «getting inefficient state enterprises into private hands is essential for the Iraqi economy». It would be the largest state liquidation since the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, when the rest of the world thought that Iraq was being destroyed and burned down, neo-liberal thinkers saw the country as being born again. In their minds a great new beginning would follow, where the 200 industrial state companies would be liberalized. Since the Iraqis would have to deal with surviving the shock of the war, they would not be able to deal with the economic shock and they would have to accept the privatization of the companies as well as the fact that they were going to lose their jobs.<sup>37</sup> Bremer was in a rush to implement his policies and so, during the first months of the war, he fired 500,000 state workers most of whom were soldiers, but also doctors, nurses, teachers, publishers and printers. Next, he opened up the borders of the country allowing unrestricted imports, with no taxes. The results of the policies were that many local Iraqi companies, unable to compete with foreign cheap imports, were forced to close. Unemployment rose to a 67% and many of the unemployed joined the insurgency. Bremer changed the laws of the country, even though the international conventions of Hague and Geneva forbid an occupying power to alter the laws of the country. Bremer put forward 100% ownership of Iraqi assets to foreign multinationals, which also gave them the freedom to export all profits made in Iraq.<sup>38</sup>

However, the US could not implement these policies alone. The IMF and the World Bank would have to play a central role to this crucial 'opening' up of Iraq by using the US \$120 billion debt that Iraq owes, in order to control its economy by advising local officials not to follow an expansionary fiscal policy that would satisfy local demands and primary needs. International players will also use the same strategy, using the debt that Iraq owes them in order for them to secure contracts for oil exploration in Iraq. The US wanted to safeguard the flow of oil to emerging powers, such as India and China. As Mark P. Thirlwell argues "If you want China to be a responsible stakeholder in the world, you need to let China buy stakes in the world. Already the Chinese have signed important deals with the Iraqi government for the exploitation of its oil".<sup>39</sup> The increasing interests of China in the country are demonstrated by the cancellation of 80% of the US \$ 8.5 billion debt that Iraq owes to Chinese firms. China has been successful in making one of the biggest deals in Halfaya and Rumaila oil fields.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, Russia is using the debt that the regime of Saddam Hussein owed to the Soviet Union in order to secure its energy interests in Iraq.<sup>41</sup> With very rough estimates it seems that the first beneficiaries of Iraqi oil (except Iraq which will hold 25% of the profits) will be Asian countries, then the UK and finally the US, Russia and the rest of Europe. It therefore seems that the economic development of Iraq will continue to be based on its oil revenues, at least for the short – medium term, where investments in other industries are seriously lacking. For 2009, the real growth rate of Iraq was 4.3%, which is 5 points below the growth rate of 2008.

The need for oil does not explain why, when there are so many Iraqis unemployed, US contractors brought thousand of Philipinos and Nepalese to work in the development projects. It also does not explain why aid is not distributed to Iraq's ministries but to American companies. In order to find these answers we need to examine the Neo-Liberal utopia of our times whose fundamental creed is that the private sector should have all the power in the economy. The economic plans of the US administration led many people to join and help the insurgency. Most companies that find themselves closing up make their final investments in the insurgency and thousands of young men join the insurgency as the only way to make a living<sup>42</sup>. Therefore, the neo-liberal utopia has not worked in Iraq since foreign companies have not invested in Iraq due to security reasons. A country that is definitely ready to take the opportunity and invest in the post-Saddam Iraq is Iran. Besides the military aid to Shia militias in Southern Iraq, Iran has serious



# Analysis Brief

Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East and Islamic Studies  
University of Peloponnese

economic interests in the country. Iran has emerged as one of Iraq's largest trading partner, and the Iranian exports to Iraq reached US\$ 1.8 billion, an increase of one billion since 2004. To demonstrate this relation, it is important to take into consideration that Iraq is the only country (outside Iran) where the Iranian currency has been used.<sup>43</sup>

To conclude, the war in Iraq occurred in order to safeguard Western economic interests. What the occupiers did not realize beforehand was that Iraqis would revolt. The real cause of the insurgency is that Iraqis found themselves unemployed, poor and humiliated. Deprived of their right to lead a normal and healthy life many people turned to violence. The words of Mahmud, a local worker in a factory, are worth mentioning. When he was asked by a foreign journalist about the privatization of the factory in which he worked, he objected and said "it is not possible, this is the only way we can live". The journalist insisted and then Mahmud stated: "there are two choices –either we will set the factory on fire and let the flames devour it to the ground, or we will blow ourselves up inside it. But it will not be privatized".<sup>44</sup>

## Notes

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# Analysis Brief

Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East and Islamic Studies  
University of Peloponnese

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