

Morning in Baghdad, cloudy noon in Sao Paulo, menacing night in Santiago

Intervention in Iraq in 2003 was a difficult and hard decision, but also unavoidable. Those who decried it did not offer credible and alternative solutions to a chronic Middle Eastern case of instability, poverty and human suffering, preferring to continue with the fiction of never ending verifications under a suspicious UN veil. It had to be done, and Americans, Britons, Australians and some others stood up to the challenge, while the rest idly observed and criticized from outside.

4 years have gone. Approximately 65.000 civilians – out of a total population close to 27 million - have died of violent causes related to this intervention and later civil confrontation among Iraqis, certainly fueled by those who preferred this part of the world to remain as it previously was, with its privileged castes and underdeveloped human and natural resources. Let us not forget that the whole Arab world, with a population close to 300 mm people, has just recently reached a US\$ 1 trillion GDP, equivalent to that of Spain. As we all know, natural resources ... they have.

Other countries have also gone through traumatic processes. Such is the case of Chile – present population of 16 million and US\$ 130 billion GDP – which got to the brink of a civil war in 1973, but then it changed, before a menacing night fell over Santiago. However, it needed a 5 year period to have its fruits being gradually accepted by its citizens, and only after liberal economic reforms and a new institutional order were in place. It took even longer to have effective communication channels between 2 clear opposing groups. Furthermore, and to make matters worse, foreign relations with neighboring countries were pretty unstable and 2 close wars were averted as this profound change was simultaneously unfolding. 3.200 dead, mainly during the first year, sadly remind us of this transformation. Economic figures tell the rest of the story.

Iraq will not be much different, but for its violence.

Some illustrative figures in the Iraqi case merit mentioning. For example, its registered cars amount to 3.5 million (Chile today, 2.5 million) from a 1.5 million prewar figure. Its 38.000 km paved roads shine against Chile's 16.000 km equivalent network, much more so when Iraq has a 437.000 sq km area and Chile one of 756.000 sq km. Its 8.7 million mobile phones (prewar figure, 0.8 million) constitute a respectable market against Chileans' 10 million. And its annual electricity consumption, close to 33 billion kWh, is equivalent to almost 70% of the Chilean one.

In other words, a logistical and transportation system is starting to work; communication systems are being rapidly updated and electricity consumption, while no larger than prewar standards, is far from the "black nights" Iraq is supposed to have. Interesting facts, are not they? And no less important, oil production has stabilized at 2.2 million barrels per day, or 90% of prewar figures, allowing Iraq to have US\$ 30 billion annual exports beyond domestic consumption. Taking into account the above improvements, which would obviously not be restricted to these areas, an impartial observer should foresee economic growth getting stronger. Market economy incentives are and will make their job. It's now time for morning in Baghdad.

Violence is clearly the Iraqi Achilles heel: 65.000 human beings caused to die because of it is a disgrace anywhere. The question is how many deaths and poverty would have been caused if no action was ever taken to reestablish the rights to live and freedom, order and private property in Iraq, along with a meaningful message beyond its borders. There is no clear cut answer, but one could reasonably presume that a successful venture in Iraq with a unified nation front would be for the better of it and the world, not least because anyone trying to gravely disrupt its order would think twice, especially in today's globalized and interdependent world.

Now, the above violence scenario needs to be compared to other experiences as well. It so happens that big cities like Sao Paulo or Rio de Janeiro in Brazil had in the recent past 56 and 69 annual homicides per 100.000 inhabitants, respectively. The cumulative 4 year figure for Iraq would be 60. Sure, last year it was higher – 1990's drug Colombian style -, but that is exactly the reason why the effort has to be increased so that a successful road is completed. Cloudy noon in Sao Paulo? Kind of, we must agree.

In summary, economic foundations seem already in place. It is broader institutional arrangements among Iraqis that need to be put into action. And in the meantime, it is obviously needed the committed support of the US, British and Australian armies and purses until the job is done. Some day the rest of the world will appreciate their effort, and perhaps pay back in kind. The worst event to happen now would be that this expensive human and money investment were to be weakened by short term politics. Let us hope voters understand the importance of a successful Iraq and wider Middle East, and get transparently informed with hard data, not biased journalism.

Some inconvenient truths policy makers should not forget: first, building a country has never been an easy task, and second, one can lose a company, but never a country.

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