



Iraq's troubles

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Iraq's election: The wrangling has only just begun

A government reflecting the people's will should slowly and messily emerge

DOZENS of explosions woke up voters in Baghdad on March 7th, heralding the day of the general election. Every few minutes another thunderous bang reminded them to stay at home, away from polling stations. Officials said the city had been hit by a barrage of mortars. Voter turnout was lower than before, in Baghdad little more than 50%. It was hardly a shining model of democracy.

The American army played down the violence. Most of the bangs, said its spokesman, had been caused by water bottles stuffed with explosives. Insurgents had put them in bins around the city and set them off by mobile phones to terrify voters. Two big bombs had killed at least 38 people but nobody was badly hurt by the bottle-bombs, said General Ray Odierno, the American commander. The bangs were an act of desperation by a fading insurgency. The turnout overall was said to be 62%. Despite the fear, many Iraqis were plainly determined to assert their democratic right to choose their leaders. Barack Obama called the election a "milestone in Iraqi history". ...

Iraq's election: Don't wash your hands of it

Iraq may ask for more American help. Barack Obama should not hold back

SEVEN years after the Americans invaded Iraq and toppled Saddam Hussein, two momentous events are approaching: a general election on March 7th and the promised departure of all American combat troops by the end of August. Yet governments across the world, most notably Barack Obama's, seem to have turned their attention elsewhere. Iraq is already yesterday's story. This is a grave error. The country has been devastated, in good part thanks to the miscalculations of America and its Western allies. It is progressing shakily and still needs outside help. And it is vital to the stability of the region. The mission has by no means been accomplished.

Iraq is far less dangerous than it was three years ago, when the Americans damped down a civil war with their last-gasp military surge. Since American troops withdrew to encampments outside the towns, their death rate has happily dived (see chart). But Iraq is still bloody. Several hundred Iraqis are still dying violently for political reasons every month—more, by the way, than in Afghanistan. Iraq's nationalist insurgency has faded, but al-Qaeda is still wreaking carnage every month or so. Flashpoints, particularly along a "trigger line" between Iraq's Arabs and Kurds, threaten the peace. Baghdad is not open for normal business, except for firms that can afford their own bomb-proof security systems. ...

Iraq's election: No promised land at the end of all this

Iraq, having beaten most of its insurgents, holds an election on March 7th. But its institutions may be too weak, and its politicians too greedy, to save democracy

THINGS had been going well for Iraq's footballers. They had re-established a national league, won the 2007 Asian Cup and last summer played host to their first post-Saddam international. Then, in November, a column of armoured police cars turned up at the headquarters of the Iraqi Football Association in eastern Baghdad. Uniformed men stormed the building, setting up sandbagged machinegun positions. They were acting on the orders of the Iraqi Olympic Committee, which is in the hands of Iraq's Shia-dominated government. The Football Association is still run mainly by Sunnis. Its directors were accused of irregularities by the government and asked to give up control. When they refused, the army moved in.

There is more than one way of looking at this. FIFA, the world football body, took a dim view of armed interference in the affairs of one of its members, and banned Iraq from all international competitions until the takeover was reversed. But America's military commanders in Iraq saw progress: after all, no shots had been fired and nobody was hurt. "We used to wake up every morning with another 100 bodies in the river," remarked General Stephen Lanza, a spokesman. Detecting an overall "maturing" of institutions along with striking improvements in security, he believes Iraq is coming right. But is it? ...

Iraq, Iran and the politics of oil: Crude diplomacy

Iraq has ambitious plans for its oil industry. That could have important implications for Iran and the rest of the region

IN EARLY September 1960 the Iraqi government hosted officials from Venezuela and three Gulf countries for an obscure five-day conference in Baghdad. Wearing suits rather than robes, and sitting at a plain wooden table, they founded the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). For the next three decades Iraq helped to lead the oil cartel as both membership and output grew rapidly. But its influence declined in 1990 when it invaded another founding member, Kuwait, and fell under United Nations sanctions. Despite having the world's third-largest reserves of oil, Iraq dropped to 13th place in the international production table. Pipelines rusted, wells remained untended and engineers emigrated.

Iraq is now trying to recover its glory, with plans to quadruple production or more. This could transform the global oil industry; it also threatens two other founding members of OPEC. Saudi Arabia might have to share its leadership of the organisation and Iran faces an even greater setback. Close relations with China, based on Beijing's thirst for oil, have helped Iran to avoid isolation over its nuclear programme. But Chinese oil companies are now turning their attention to Iraq, with American backing. ...

Iraq's dangerous trigger line: Too late to keep the peace?

The Americans are trying again to keep the peace between Arabs and Kurds

FROM the market town of Khanaqin, on the Iranian border, all the way to Sinjar, near the border with Syria, a fortified line snakes across northern Iraq. To the east and north stand Kurdish forces, known as the Peshmerga, keen to reclaim land taken from them by Saddam Hussein more than two decades ago. On the other side of the line, to the west and south, are Iraqi regular-army troops sent by the central government in Baghdad to stop ancient cities along the Tigris river falling into what it fears may become a purely Kurdish sphere.

The two forces have come close to flat-out fighting several times, usually outside the cities where commanders act off their own bat. Last year an Iraqi army unit drove into the disputed, though mainly Kurdish, town of Altun Kupri and took up sniper positions on rooftops. When residents, supported by armed Peshmerga, started demonstrating against their presence, the Arab soldiers were told to shoot to kill. Bloodshed was avoided at the last minute by American troops stationed nearby. ...

Iraq's coming election: Reopening the old sectarian wounds

Relations between Iraq's Shias and Sunnis have again been badly damaged

IN THE run-up to a general election due on March 7th, Iraq's authorities seem to be taking a page out of Iran's illiberal electoral rule book by barring candidates they dislike. One of the competing parties, the Iraqi National Congress, led by Ahmed Chalabi, a longtime Shia exile who helped persuade George Bush to invade Iraq in 2003, has persuaded the election's overseers to ban some 500 candidates deemed too close in the past to Saddam Hussein's Baath party. After the invasion the Americans put Mr Chalabi, then their closest Iraqi ally, in charge of 'de-Baathification', but he later fell out with them, so he turned for succour to Iran. Now, with a view to winning more votes for himself, he is using his long-dormant post to accuse his foes of having supported the deposed dictator. Though the list contains many Shias, Iraq's minority Sunnis, who ruled the roost under Mr Hussein, are outraged, seeing a plot to discriminate against them. The episode could badly tarnish the poll.

Many other Shia politicians have joined what looks like a witch hunt. Muhammad al-Haidari, a leader of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), a powerful Shia group, says that Baathists are worse than Nazis; all past members should, he says, be banned from public life. In the holy city of Najaf, ISCI's heartland, a new rule decrees that former Baathists must be purged from government and chased out of town. Never mind that Iraq's post-invasion constitution bars only senior Baathists from public office and that millions of ordinary Iraqis joined the party only out of necessity, not conviction. Ostracising them threatens once again to split Iraq down the middle and disfranchise many Sunnis, who used to dominate the Baath party. ...

Reporting Iraq: Still fraught

A bomb in a hotel favoured by reporters illustrates the toughness of the job

IN THE past two years a correspondent's job in Iraq has become a little easier. But it is still dangerous. The Hamra Hotel, hit by a car-bomb on January 25th, is a favourite haven for foreign reporters. Our own correspondent, in his room when the blast went off, was slightly cut. But his driver was killed, along with at least 15 other people. Blasts in two other well-known hotels brought the overall death toll to at least 41.

At the height of sectarian strife three years ago, no Western reporter who was not crazily intrepid would travel openly and alone, either in Baghdad or across the country, bar the Kurdish part or in the capital's fortified Green Zone. Most reporting was done remotely, by telephone or through Iraqis working discreetly for media outlets. Even a year ago, it was unwise for reporters to drive around the country or city without guards. ...

Bagehot: Regime changer

Is it feasible to hate the Iraq war but still love Labour?

THERE is a small but doughty band of Britons who still agree with what Tony Blair will probably tell the Iraq inquiry on January 29th (the day after The Economist goes to press): that the war was just, justified and "the right thing to do". There is a much larger group whose interest in politics is essentially parochial—"pocketbook voters for whom foreign entanglements are marginal concerns. The affiliations and voting intentions of both these groups are unlikely to be shifted much by the old controversies and occasional piece of new evidence being aired by the inquiry.

But what about those who care about Britain's role in the world, and feel anger and shame over Iraq? There are many natural Labour supporters in that category. There are several eminent political commentators in it too, who nevertheless still back the Labour government: columnists who hate the war but still love the warrior. This intellectual position, it seems to Bagehot, is increasingly tricky to maintain. ...

**From the archive: If you can think of something even
beastlier, do it**

From 1988: Our correspondent reports on Iraq's chemical attack on a
Kurdish town that killed thousands

FROM OUR LEVANT CORRESPONDENT

EIGHT years of carnage have not robbed the Gulf war of its capacity to
shock. In the middle of March (the exact date is unclear) Iranian soldiers
pushed the Iraqi army out of the Kurdish town of Halabja, in the
Kurdish part of north-east Iraq. One or two days later (this date, too, is
unclear), the Iraqi air force appears to have responded by bombing
Halabja with some sort of poisonous gas. ...

The Iraq-war inquiry: Campbell's soup

The spin doctor's testimony left a bad taste in the mouth

HOW are the mighty fallen. The scheduling of the Chilcot inquiry into the Iraq war has allocated to Alastair Campbell, once New Labour's all-powerful spin doctor, a role little better than that of a warm-up act for the former prime minister. On January 12th he appeared before the five-strong panel, headed by a former senior civil servant, and faced the toughest questioning so far about Britain's invasion of Iraq. Tony Blair "his friend and erstwhile boss, who takes the hot seat soon" will have been watching anxiously.

There were omissions and ambiguities in Mr Campbell's testimony that should shape the panel's questioning of the former prime minister (see article). There were also pugnacious certainties guaranteed to incite the war's critics. He claimed to stand by "every single word" of an influential and controversial dossier setting out the government's view of Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in September 2002, and brushed aside as "churlish" less flattering testimonies given to the inquiry earlier. ...

Tony Blair and Britain's Iraq inquiry: Weapons inspection

The right questions to ask the former prime minister

THERE have already been so many inquiries into the Iraq war (including one in the Netherlands that this week judged the invasion to have been illegal), and it was all so long ago, that many people thought the latest British probe, under Sir John Chilcot, would prove pointless. In fact it has already been informative, not least because some of the soldiers, spooks and diplomats who have given evidence have grown franker since retirement. On January 12th Sir John's panel questioned Alastair Campbell, formerly the government's main spin doctor. His testimony was a telling rehearsal for the imminent appearance of the star witness: his old boss, Tony Blair.

Despite his nominal job description, Mr Campbell helped to construct and purvey the controversial case for war. "Nobody was really saying that Saddam Hussein did not have weapons of mass destruction [WMD]," he observed this week. That is true. Saddam's record of making and using such weapons, the hunches of UN inspectors and the fact that the dictator continued to frustrate them and act guilty until the very end all made it seem that he still retained some WMD. ...



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