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"Stabilisation Challenges Facing Iraq after the Defeat of Daesh"

The rapid military destruction of the so called Caliphate is vital, for strategic, economic, moral and, above all, humanitarian reasons. It is obviously indispensable to the full reconstitution and evolution of the Iraqi state.

But what is also critical, though often overlooked, is the correspondingly necessary, and extensive, stabilisation agenda. Meeting this agenda is already paramount, as Iraq forces advance with support from the International Coalition. If stabilisation is to be done as well as it might be, it must be planned in advance, and its demands may not always be easily compatible with military objectives or timescales.

It is always worth thinking what is meant in any particular context by "stabilisation", which has proved to be an elusive, politicised and changeable concept. (It took 9 disputatious months to agree between contending UK Departments in 2005.) The latest British definition, published by the interdepartmental Stabilisation Unit is this:

"*Stabilisation is one of the approaches used in situations of violent conflict which is designed to protect and promote legitimate political authority. It uses a combination of integrated civilian and military actions to reduce violence, re-establish security and prepare for longer-term recovery, thus building an enabling environment for structural stability* " [i]

After the failures, or inordinately costly successes, of earlier Western efforts at contested state building in Iraq and Afghanistan[ii], stabilization doctrine now stresses the indispensability of political consent by the population to any post - conflict political framework for eventual long term overall success: the Primacy of Politics[iii].

It is worth noting that there are two different kinds and directions of *time* you during internal conflicts like Iraq's. Most military planning has to aim *forward* as part of an overall unfolding campaign and in response to enemy tactics – moving ahead in pursuit of victory. By contrast, preparing to implement stabilisation often means thinking *backwards* from the intended end state: presumably, in Iraq's case, the stable and sustainable political, legal, economic and social reintegration of territories occupied and changed, in more or less fateful ways, by Daesh. Government services of all kinds, electricity, power, water, healthcare, justice and administration, will need to be sequentially provided and maintained through logical planning frameworks resting on critical decision paths of the kind used in the delivery of major technical projects. But these technocratic necessities also need to be implemented in ways that local people find acceptable. Among many other things, that means they should be seen to be based on a fair distribution of national revenues, especially from oil, and to allow for the development of local economies which can achieve adequate standards of living. Strategic communication of efforts and successes is vital to convey government concern and maximise optimism and trust in this process, despite inevitable delays. But, like so much else on any list of stabilisation requirements, effective publicity is never easy – even when improvements are indisputable.

Ideally, I suggest, there would be some form of unfolding national master plan, consensually endorsed at the highest political levels, worked out with the Iraqi Armed Forces and representatives of the International Coalition against Daesh, who provide air support and training. The plan would specify and coordinate the various non-military lines of operation which would have to combine to reach that good - enough stabilising end state. This will most obviously be needed to ensure immediate humanitarian provision for those civilians, perhaps numbering, hundreds of thousands, who may be displaced by fighting , especially in major cities such as Mosul , Fallujah and Ramadi, for repairing damaged or deliberately destroyed buildings and infrastructure , and extensive demining of huge numbers of improvised explosive devices. But it will also be indispensable for recruitment, posting and resourcing of skilled specialists such as engineers, doctors, teachers and policemen. Repeated experiences of stabilisation indicate that it is usually easier to build or buy *things*, than to operate them effectively with the properly supported specialists in the right places.

In Northwest Iraq, which has been so divided, by internal migration and displacement, with disputed internal boundaries, complicated by past forced migration dating back to the 1960s and exacerbated by the traumatic experience of clashing extremist religious or ethnic groups, it will also be important how, and even by exactly which, military units or militias, Daesh is defeated and driven out of particular areas. So, subject to truly overriding military necessities, it will be essential to avoid creating even the impression of deliberately tolerating disproportionate or unnecessary civilian casualties, and desirable to ensure that liberation does not occur in circumstances where local people fear, rightly or wrongly, that they may suffer at the hands of particular forces fighting Daesh. Statements by the Iraqi Prime Minister indicate his awareness of this point - but it appears to have been rejected by fervently Shiite Popular Mobilisation Front militias, who insist that they will enter Fallujah and Mosul. It is obviously impossible for outsiders to give any precise advice about the extraordinarily complex military trade-offs which this concern may imply, in the patchwork of Sunni and Shia , Arab , Kurds, Turkmen, Yezidis , Christians, Kaka'i, and Shaback. [iv]

In whatever pattern or sequence Iraqi forces fight their way back to reimpose control it will be vital that, as far as humanly possible, behaviour is not locally experienced as vengeful or abusive. Very real operational necessities will undoubtedly occur, but resultant decisions should not allowed to look like collective punishments.(Stories have already emerged of harshly sectarian behaviour, including torture , especially from irregular forces such as the Popular Mobilisation Front militias in recent operations round Fallujah[v]. It is impossible for outside commentators to judge how accurate or balanced these accounts are. Nevertheless, even if they were all entirely fictitious, it would be disastrous if such stories continue to appear without effective rebuttal and become widely believed.) Much of the subsequent successes of stabilisation may depend upon the first days or even hours after the defeat of Daesh. Keeping control of military behaviour, under the most trying battlefield circumstances, and especially in irregular units, by investigating and punishing abuses will be critical. Haidar al-Abadi, the Iraqi prime minister, has set up a Rights Committee to examine "any violation to the instructions on the protection of civilians", and issued "strict orders" for prosecutions of any abuses.[vi] Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, has also promulgated a code of conduct for forces fighting Isis. [vii] These moves are far-seeing and entirely appropriate. Investigations are reportedly already underway, with at least one reported arrest of a police officer. But eventual credibility will, as ever, depend upon establishing a reputation over time for governmental credibility though proven state capacity and institutional integrity.

No one should underestimate the difficulties of firm but just security control. We must unfortunately anticipate many more Daesh atrocities, provocations, poisonous rumours and disinformation, deliberately designed to create unbearable memories and tensions between former neighbours. They are already intermingling with civilians and will hope to bequeath a toxic legacy of understandable but criminal retributive behaviour, making up for Daesh's torture and murder of relatives and the theft or wanton destruction of irreplaceable property.

Nor can it be expected that the actual physical security threat will evaporate fast, even when the front lines move remorselessly over former Daesh positions. Daesh already seems to be resorting to the war crime of creating human shields by preventing populations under their control leaving as fighting intensifies. And, when facing imminent defeat, some Daesh fighters will almost certainly try to go underground, in all senses. So a range of suspects will have to be identified, captured, screened- which probably requires the inevitably emotionally disturbing separation of men from their families- charged, confined, investigated, subjected to justice – and *perhaps*, eventually reintegrated. (There are no reports, anywhere, of the deprogramming of captured Daesh personnel being conducted with any great effectiveness, though details may not have been fully disclosed. Deprogramming and reintegration may never prove to be possible, although previous Saudi experience with Al Qaeda prisoners might be relevant and it is apparent that some Daesh personnel have been recruited essentially by intimidation or promises of payment.)

Failure to attend properly to security would mean that effective local administration in newly liberated areas will then be impossible to achieve because of intimidation or assassination. Intelligence on the behaviour and sympathies of key individuals and families will therefore be important, difficult and highly dependent upon accurate, undistorted local knowledge. Local suspicions will undoubtedly be high and there will be a tendency to interpret every necessary police or army action as a form of score settling. Re-establishing control harshly or corruptly, based on dubious allegations or stereotyping would undermine the future stability of Iraq's Northwest. Some form of conflict resolution and dispute mediation, (usually facilitated by religious or ethnic leaders) leading to a wider process of reconciliation will be deeply desirable, and at least some degree of devolution of responsibilities seems essential. But any healing process could be irreversibly prejudiced by failures in the early post-conflict stage. And at some well-judged, but hopefully early, point, it will be essential to plan and manage the resettlement of previously displaced groups, possibly in entirely new locations, without adding to inter-communal resentments.

Apart from transitional justice after a period of massive human rights abuse, re-establishing local administration will also be an extraordinary challenge. If local people are not given some kind of responsibility for their towns and villages, they will be unlikely to feel loyalty. On the other hand, there will be an obvious risk that the wrong people will be put in charge or left in positions of influence. This raises the question of how deep and how long the process of what might have to be called "de-Daeshifaction" should go. There are obvious analogies here with the sensitive question of de-Baathification which has overhung Iraqi political life since 2003 and this is doubly inevitable because of the Baathist influence on Daesh. There is little public evidence so far of any Iraqi government plan to engage with key local Sunni figures or groups to try to draw them into positions of responsibility after the ejection of Daesh. While it is possible that discreet, back channel, are underway, there is a disturbing absence of reports of any such process.

And solutions in the territories reoccupied from Daesh will have to be made to achieve some consistency with arrangements in the rest of Iraq. This will not just be true in the fields of justice and administration. It will also generally apply to all public jobs and contracts. A critical question will be how far the *muhasasa* system of ethno sectarian quotas [viii]will be reintroduced in the liberated territories and how it is applied in practice. That will no doubt be much influenced by the way that this pervasive but increasingly controversial system will continue in the rest of the country. Yet it must be true that, in a region where Daesh found so many supporters, any suspicion that Sunnis were still suffering major discrimination would very badly reduce the chances of effective and successful stabilisation.

Suspicions of systematic corruption will also be corrosive. And is widespread awareness of how much of a general problem this has been throughout Iraq [ix]. A reasonably fair, transparent and rigorous system of inspection and investigation will be an important aspect of success for stabilisation. (The Coalition Provisional Authority thought it had set one up through the arrangements introduced in 2003-4. We were wrong .The system we left behind allowed both massive theft and the politically driven prosecution of some talented and honest individuals under cover of anti-corruption measures. Unless there is overall integrity within the governance system, apparently strong anticorruption or other investigatory procedures can become perverse instruments for the punishment of virtue[x].) Improved transparency and accountability in public finance will be all the more important if pressures on overall Iraqi government revenue continue to mount due to depressed oil prices and limited production capacity. Local people are likely to take seriously any accusation that they are being unfairly deprived of their share of state resources, perhaps as a perceived punishment for supporting or collaborating with Daesh. After years of disruption, local expectations of state support may now be generally low, but the quality and reliability of the electricity supply and of clean water in particular have been of great symbolic importance in forming public judgements of the government in Iraq.

In sombre conclusion, there is no doubt of the scale of the intertwined problems which the Iraqi government will face over stabilisation. Many are not unique to Iraq. Most have proved intractable since 2003 and their confluence has indeed created many of the conditions which led to the rise of Daesh. Nonetheless, unless there is real willingness to look analytically and objectively at painful intertwined issues and to work on them with sustained determination for the overall good of all sections of the Iraqi people, long-term stabilisation is unlikely to be effective. And failure will mean a further, indefinitely protracted period of murderous, mostly low intensity conflict – though always with the risk of occasional more extensively lethal upswings. The Iraqi people undoubtedly deserve every sympathy, and it would be wise for the international community to ensure not only effective military support but generous civilian advice and assistance. But there is undeniable Western electoral fatigue with interventions and their endlessly destructive and repetitious aftermaths, while the Iraqi government has already suffered reputational damage over sectarianism[xi], human rights [xii] and corruption. While Coalition military assistance to destroy Daesh seems likely to continue, indefinitely continued and unconditional international generosity is therefore far from certain in civilian sphere. Much will now depend upon the visible, well-planned, effectiveness and good faith of Iraqi government efforts - in stabilisation as well as combat.

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[vi] "Iraq: Fallujah Abuses Test Control of Militias , Investigate Government Command Responsibility; ISIS Stops Civilians From Fleeing" Human Rights Watch June 9, 2016 https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/06/09/iraq-fallujah-abuses-test-control-militias

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