

Poor Sick Iraq



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Preamble:

Among other things, MAPW attempts to bring a thoughtful ‘medical’ perspective to any discussion of the use of military intervention as an aspect of Australian foreign policy, balancing good intentions against harm inflicted, encouraging both peaceful conflict resolution and the avoidance of unnecessary suffering.

In this article about what our response should be to the recent development of ISIL in Iraq and Syria, I have confined myself to discussing what is best for the sick country of Iraq, as if that country was my patient, perhaps. The debate could also be about what is best for the Middle East as a whole, or for Western interests there, or for the American people, or the standing of the American president, or the finances of various vested interests there, or about what is best for Australia, or the popularity of the Australian government, and so on. But what is best for the people of Iraq is complex enough for a start.

Apart from being a member of MAPW, I have recently spent two years working for Medecins Sans Frontiers on various health projects in the Middle East, including in Iraq, and have taken a prolonged interest in what is happening there. So I bring to this a first-hand knowledge of Iraq itself that may be missing for many Australians, as well as my perspective as a doctor and as a psychiatrist.

The Iraqi Sickness:

The US did not press to remove Saddam Hussein after the first Gulf War in 1990-91 because it feared another Lebanon – a failed state torn by ethnic and sectarian rivalries. This is what has now occurred since the 2003 US-led invasion and has proven to be its longest-lasting and most significant legacy. There were plenty of commentators warning against these effects at the time, and plenty saying Saddam's regime did not pose a genuine threat to the West. Even if Saddam had weapons of mass destruction, which he did not, there was little indication he would use them against the West. Yet we made this mistake and are in danger of now making matters worse.

Subsequent to this 2003 invasion, the insurgency in Iraq, opposed to what had happened and to the continuing occupation of their country by the West, was largely Sunni. The US worked with Shiites in brutal counterinsurgency measures against them. These included a regime of wide spread torture of Sunnis, often of individuals against whom there was little more than hearsay evidence from Shia rivals. This was not generally known about in the West at the time, but has become public in recent years. Beheadings were also common. People disappeared and turned up headless on the streets. This intimidation and torture-based aspect of the US counterinsurgency encouraged extreme hostility between these two major components of the population of Iraq, who had previously lived side by side for the most part, in an uneasy peace. The hugely exacerbated sectarian rivalry then grew out of US control and has continued ever since, with atrocities committed by both sides.

The US then supported the further divisive Shiite Nouri al-Maliki government in running the new Iraq with cruelty, comparable to that of Saddam Hussein, plus extraordinary incompetence, and debilitating corruption. The once-good infra structure and health services in Iraq are now prohibitively expensive and appallingly bad, business cannot thrive, and the police, prisons and judiciary concern themselves with extorting money from innocent people rather than promoting the rule of law. Comment, criticism and opposition from the more-educated, and previously more competent, Sunnis has been brutally suppressed with a continuing regime of intimidation by government-supported death squads, imprisonment and torture. I am not sure if this includes continued beheadings or not. Car bombs, particularly in the market places of various cities in Iraq, continue generally unreported in our press. Twenty people were killed by suicide bombers in Baghdad at the same time as we have been distressed by the recent activities of ISIL. Many times more would have been permanently disabled or disfigured by these bombs. Huge numbers have had this happen to them throughout Iraq over recent years, while the government in Baghdad encourages the sectarian divide for its own ends. Try as we might to dismiss suicide bombers as simply mad, they are surely symptomatic of a distressed society. Suicide bombers have often experienced gross injustices to themselves or their families against which there is no redress and no future protection.

Now an extremist oppositional Sunni group has arisen, not surprisingly, and something we think is worse than anything that came before in its brutality, being more ideological and less merely opportunist, having quickly gained power, money and territory, and having

deliberately provoked our dismay with internet beheadings of Westerners. The Iraqi army was highly-equipped, and said to be well-trained, by the US before departure, but showed little interest in fighting them, however. Our media has blamed the Iraqi army for being 'weak' or 'unmotivated', but I do not think that there is any question Iraqi soldiers can be extremely brave when they want to be. So the more useful questions to ask might be: 'Why do they not want to fight ISIL?' Maybe they do not want to support their own government as we imagine they would. The tribal leaders of Anbar Province have not opposed ISIL and have allowed them to within a few kilometers of Baghdad. Maybe they do not want their current government either.

What are we doing to help?

Years too late, the US recently withdrew support for the much-disliked al-Maliki, once ISIL had appeared on the scene, and encouraged his replacement in Baghdad with Haider al-Abadi, on the grounds that any military assistance in dealing with ISIL should be accompanied by the Baghdad government mending its ways and working to re-unite the country and run it as a whole. Obama claimed to be impressed by Abadi's political vision in this regard. A few days later, however, Abadi surprised everyone by telling reporters at the UN general Assembly that Iraq had 'credible' evidence that ISIL was planning to bomb subways in Paris and New York. No-one else had any evidence of this, and the citizens of the two cities were quickly reassured by their own leaders. The reliability of the new Iraqi leader was called into question, however, along with his so-called 'vision', as everyone wonders what game he is playing at.

Hopes for re-uniting the country under this new leader remain low. Nevertheless, he is the one whose fight we wish to take up. And maybe he does not even want us there himself, unless he can turn it to his advantage, although we are said to have been invited. Tony Abbot had offered on-the-ground Australian military advisors in Baghdad, but time has passed and the new Abadi government continues to delay processing the offer.

The role of the Kurds:

Meanwhile, in the north of Iraq the US after their 2003 invasion had championed the creation of the semi-autonomous region of Kurdistan. The Kurdish government, also supported by the US since then, has run that part of Iraq slightly better, but elections were of dubious legitimacy, criticism was suppressed with political imprisonments, and government members were also corrupt, self-serving and neglectful of the needs of the people despite the large amounts of oil-money at their disposal. They also harbour ambitions to secede from the rest of Iraq taking most of the oil-rich territory with them. Their army, the *Pesh Merga*, with a traditional hatred of the Arabs, has been willing to fight ISIL, but has already committed atrocities against non-combatant Arabs in the areas where they have been doing so. They have also acquired new territory for the Kurds that they did not previously have, further disuniting Iraq as a whole.

How to help?

What the people of Iraq need is a healing of wounds and eventual recovery from the debilitating effect of ethnic and sectarian conflict. Maybe they will do this eventually by forming three separate countries, or maybe by eventually working together for the common good. It would be in everyone's best interest long-term, and theirs in particular, to encourage such healing.

But will it help for the West to take sides and intervene again with military force? ISIL is no doubt brutal in its methods, and the people of Iraq need to protect themselves against this, but should we be supporting militarily one lot of bullies in power against other bullies seeking power? Will this kind of support for the appalling government in Baghdad improve the country long-term or make sectarian divisions worse? Will this kind of support for the suspect Kurds help or make things worse? Will Western military opposition to ISIL weaken it or strengthen its numbers by encouraging recruits by having them see the West as their enemy as well?

Add to this that our bombs, and perhaps eventual on-the-ground intervention, will kill and injure large numbers more of Iraqi noncombatants, and displace many more from their homes.

Maybe we have made too many mistakes already by taking sides in Iraq's internal struggles. Maybe doing so again remains counterproductive. Maybe there is nothing to be done militarily. Perhaps the best we can do is offer humanitarian assistance to those displaced or injured, and encourage the Iraqis to deal with their problems their own way. This may not sound like much, considering how provoked we are by ISIL's gestures towards us, but to do something just for the sake of doing something, when nothing will work, and when doing something may well make matters worse, is ridiculous. Maybe we have already made such a mess through military intervention in Iraq our only option is to stop before we cause more suffering? This happens in medical practice sometimes. Sometimes further surgery is only going to aggravate the pain.