

COMMENT

## Continuing Civil War

FIVE YEARS OF OCCUPATION have destroyed Iraq as a country. Baghdad is today a collection of hostile Sunni and Shia ghettos divided by high concrete walls. Different districts even have different national flags. Sunni areas use the old Iraqi flag with the three stars of the Baath party and the Shia wave a newer version, adopted by the Shia-Kurdish government. The Kurds have their own flag.

The Iraqi government tries to give the impression that normality is returning. Iraqi journalists are told not to mention the continuing violence. When a bomb exploded in Karada district killing 70 people the police beat and drove away the television cameraman trying to take pictures of the devastation. Civilian casualties have fallen from 65 Iraqis killed daily from November 2006 to August 2007 to 26 daily in February. But the fall in the death rate is partly because ethnic cleansing has already done its grim work and in much of Baghdad there are no mixed areas left. More than most wars the war in Iraq remains little understood outside the country. Iraqis themselves often do not understand it because they have an intimate knowledge of their own community, be it Shia, Sunni or Kurdish, but little of other Iraqi communities. It should have been evident from the moment President George W Bush decided to overthrow Saddam Hussein that it was going to be a very different war from the one fought by his father in 1991. That had been a conservative war waged to restore the status quo ante in Kuwait.

The US and its allies never really understood the war they won which started on March 19, 2003. Their armies had an easy passage to Baghdad because the Iraqi army did not fight. Even the so-called elite Special Republican Guard units, well paid, well equipped and tribally linked to Saddam, went home. Television coverage and much of the newspaper coverage of the war was highly deceptive because it gave the impression of widespread fighting when there was none. Mosul and Kirkuk, two northern cities, were captured with hardly a shot fired. Burned out Iraqi tanks littered the roads around Baghdad, giving the impression of heavy fighting, but almost all had been abandoned by their crews before they were hit.

The war was too easy. Consciously or subconsciously Americans came to believe it did not matter what Iraqis said or did. They were expected to behave like Germans or Japanese in 1945, though most of Iraqis did not think of themselves as having been defeated. Al Qa'ida in Iraq regarded the Shia as heretics as worthy of death as the Americans. Enormous suicide bombs exploded in Shia market places and religious processions slaughtering hundreds, and the Shia began to hit back with tit-for-tat killing of Sunni by Shia death militia—death squads or the police.

After the Sunni guerrillas blew up the Shia shrine in Samarra on 22 February 2006 sectarian fighting turned into a full blown civil war. Mr Bush and Mr Blair strenuously denied that this was so, but by any standard it was a civil war of extraordinary viciousness. Torture with electric drills and acid became the norm.

The Shia Mehdi Army militia took over much of Baghdad and controlled three quarters of it. Some 2.2 million people fled to Jordan and Syria, a high proportion of them Sunni.

The Sunni defeat in the battle for Baghdad in 2006 and early 2007 was the motive for many guerrillas, previously anti-American, suddenly allying themselves with American forces. They concluded they could not fight the US, al Qa'ida, the Iraqi army and police and the Mehdi Army at the same time. There is now an 80,000 strong Sunni militia paid for and allied to the US but hostile to the Iraqi government. Five years after the American and British armies crossed into Iraq the country has become a geographical expression.□