

Article by the High Representative, Paddy Ashdown: “What Baghdad can learn from Bosnia”

Paddy Ashdown has a better idea than most of how to rebuild Iraq – he has already done it in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Here he explains why the first priority is to restore the rule of law

Now comes the difficult part, what Kipling described as “Winning the savage war of peace.” The coalition has won the war in Iraq, but could still lose the peace. Public debate, today as always, focuses largely on the mechanics of war, not on how to forge a settlement in a far-off country.

That is natural. Just a few weeks ago, before the coalition forces rolled into Iraq, there was widespread fear that the conflict could ignite a Middle-East conflagration. Chemical weapons attacks, bloody street-fighting, orchestrated missile assaults on neighboring countries were all possibilities. Following the lightning coalition advance and the non-appearance of serious Iraqi organised resistance, the result of the war has come to be viewed as a foregone conclusion. If the coalition victory has been greeted with satisfaction and relief, its conclusiveness has been accompanied by a precipitate decline in public interest. The newsworthiness of Iraq has – like Saddam’s supposedly formidable Republican Guard – faded away.

Yet Iraq will not become a stable country at peace with the rest of the world – the stated coalition war aim – unless the huge amount of effort that went into fighting is now applied to making a long-term settlement. Support can be created to fight an expensive war. But it is more difficult to sustain

the same level of support for the high cost of establishing peace. I made the same point in parliament seven and a half years ago, when the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina was at last coming to an end. Politicians, diplomats, and generals had dithered for four years in the face of ethnic cleansing and massacres. When the international community finally summoned the will to intervene, Nato planes ended the war in a matter of weeks. Then, as now, there was intense debate over the merits and the nature of intervention, but little real discussion of how to win the peace.

Then there were few precedents to guide us. Now there are many. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Afghanistan have demonstrated that what happens after the fighting is every bit as important as the military campaign. Arguably, more important.

We have become all too good at winning these wars. But far less good at winning the peace that follows them. Yet building peace requires just as much focused political will, often rather more resources, and infinitely greater patience over the long term than winning swift victories.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, we have spent six years on the kind of nation-building that may now be needed in Iraq. We had to disarm and demobilise the armies. In 1995, there were 430,000 people under arms (in a country of fewer than four million); today there are 22,000. We had to produce the money and manpower to enable hundreds of thousands of refugees to return to their homes – and a million have, but there are still a million more who haven't. At the end of the Bosnian war, different currencies were in circulation and the economy had ceased to function. Today, we have one of the most stable currencies in the Balkans and an inflation rate close to zero. The economy is slowly growing and, though unemployment remains unacceptably high, a small and medium-sized enterprise sector is taking shape. The cost? Around \$5bn (£3.2bn) in international aid.

Mistakes have also been made. The early (and huge) influx of aid was inadequately coordinated. This fuelled the corruption created by the chaos of the war years. An emphasis on forging political compromises among the Dayton signatories – in many cases the same individuals who had ruthlessly accrued money and power during the war – meant that peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina took hold amid a climate of corruption. This has led to bureaucratic sclerosis and widespread cynicism among the general public. The UN helped establish a professional postwar police service – a task now taken over by the EU – but the process of revamping the judicial system, weeding out corrupt judges, retraining court staff and creating a new penal system did not properly get under way until recently.

The failure to establish, quickly and decisively, the rule of law in Bosnia-Herzegovina, repeated in Kosovo, is something for which we have paid a high price. That is why the looting in Baghdad and Basra, even though expected, has to be treated seriously. Coalition soldiers have to be prepared to take over police duties until a regular police force can be established. This is a tall order. But it is not a luxury – it has to be done. Unless law and order is consolidated quickly and comprehensively, peace will not take hold and the benefits of the coalition victory will be swiftly lost as criminals and corruption swarm into the vacuum.

Promoting democracy in Bosnia and Herzegovina was the highest priority in the aftermath of the Dayton agreement. We measured the success of this by the number of elections we could organise. Seven years and six elections on, however, citizens – faced with a sprawling bureaucracy, widespread crime and a chronic lack of employment opportunities – have grown weary of voting, as the general elections last year showed. The focus on elections, meanwhile, slowed our efforts to tackle organised crime and corruption. Only now are we really tackling these forces and making progress to improving the quality of life and making Bosnia business- and investment-

friendly.

As in Bosnia, so in Iraq, everything depends on the early establishment of the rule of law: a functioning economy, a free and fair political system, the development of civil society, public confidence in the police and the courts. The process is sequential.

Not everything between the two countries is the same, of course. Some of our problems here are very different. Here we had four and a half years of war in which 85% of our houses were damaged. In Iraq they had three weeks of war, and the damage will be far less. Here we have limited natural resources. Iraq sits on the second largest oil reserves in the world. Here we had four years' worth of war criminals; Iraq may have many criminals from before the war, but will have few created by it. In other ways, however, Iraq's problems will be worse. Bosnia's pre-war situation was far better than Iraq's after 30 years of Saddam's tyranny, and 15 of UN sanctions.

But, whatever our differences, the paramount importance of establishing the rule of law as the foundation of democratic development remains the same. And here, the first hours are the ones that matter most. In Bosnia and Kosovo we paid a bitter price for not establishing the rule of law early. It is not a mistake we should repeat in Baghdad.

Paddy Ashdown is the international community's high representative for Bosnia-Herzegovina.

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