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# opini3n

## SEGURIDAD Y POL3TICA MUNDIAL

## The second Iraq war is over, isn't it?

**Francesc Badia i Dalmases**

Executive Manager, CIDOB

On Tuesday 31 August, in his second speech from the Oval Office since coming to power, President Obama announced that “Operation Iraqi Freedom” had come to an end. Though he never actually said “the Iraq War is over”, he did adopt a posthumous tone when he described the last combat brigade crossing the border into Kuwait, and when speaking of the almost 1.5 million Americans (an incredible figure) who had fought “in a faraway place for people they never knew”. He said that they had “stared into the darkest of human creations – war – and helped the Iraqi people seek the light of peace”.

But beyond the heroic rhetoric, the fact is that this long American war has come at an enormous cost for a decidedly mediocre result, a result that shows that the war was a mistake, or rather a chain of tragic mistakes. The resulting human, social, economic and political cost has brought about a profound crisis in the international system, which will never be the same again. The breaking of the post-war consensus and America’s Doctrine of Containment gave way to the *neocoon* strategy of unilateralism, preventive war, and the “coalition of the willing”, a doctrine promoted by Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle and Dick Cheney who, under the auspices of the “Project for the New American Century” (or PNAC), dominated much of George W. Bush’s term of office.

The cost in terms of destruction and human lives lost, to begin with, includes not only the more than 4,400 US soldiers (3,500 of whom died in active combat), but also hundreds of thousands of Iraqis. The figures speak of 112,000 civilian deaths (Brookings Institution Iraq Index Archive) (1), though in 2006 researchers from Johns Hopkins published a study in the medical journal *The Lancet* in which they estimated that the total number of civilian deaths directly or indirectly attributable to the war totalled 601,000 (2). In addition to the thousands of injured, displaced persons within the country and refugees abroad (1.55 and 1.78 million respectively at the end of 2009, according to ACNUR (3)), there was also the fracturing of society caused by sectarian violence, which meant that in addition to the insurgency against the occupying troops, the country was also subjected to a cruel fratricidal war and a bloody suicide bombing campaign organised by the organisation Al-Qaeda in Iraq, though this became progressively weaker following the death of its leader al-Zarqawi. The invasion by the US-led coalition also brought about the dismembering of Iraq’s army and its security forces, with the resulting chaos in a state that was unable to provide security for its citizens, nor to prevent the looting of public institutions, libraries and museums. The emblematic moment in this cultural disaster was the blowing up, in 2006, of the Golden Mosque of Samarra, a place of pilgrimage and worship that had been included on UNESCO’s World Heritage List.

The economic cost has been huge, as well. In his aforementioned speech, Barack Obama claimed that the war had cost one trillion US dollars (€780,000 million), a cost that was for the most part financed through overseas debt. But the true cost is believed to have been much greater. Joseph Stiglitz, Nobel prize-winner for economics, together with Harvard professor Linda Bilmes, estimate that by early 2008 the cost had in fact reached three times this figure, a claim they present in a book titled *The 3 Trillion Dollar War: the True Cost of the Iraq Conflict*, published in March of that year. In addition to the grave economic difficulties in which the country was mired, the destruction of its infrastructures and its systems of production (apart for its oil wells), Iraq also suffered a sharp fall in terms of quality of life and basic services (in addition to the shortages of running water and power, the number of doctors in Iraq, for example, went from 34,000 before the invasion in 2003 to 16,000 in December 2008, with some 2,000 doctors believed killed) (4). The collateral impact of the war on the price of oil and on the international financial system are factors which, at the very least, did not help to curb the difficult economic situation into which the United States has been plunged, and which continues to affect Western economies today.

The political cost has also been very high for the international system. The breaking of international consensus and the contempt shown for the UN Security Council (when a resolution authorising the war that the US and Britain yearned for was rejected) plunged the United Nations into a dangerous crisis that pushed it into a position of being virtually irrelevant. The manipulation of information and intelligence to justify the intervention in Iraq was deplorable, and has left us with an image for history: General Colin Powell, the then US Secretary of State, brandishing a test tube at the UN General Assembly, alleging that it contained proof of the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. It was a lie. The cost was also high in Europe, as a gulf grew between those who opposed intervention and those who supported the coalition of the willing (with Spain to the fore), thus promoting a destructive rhetoric of confrontation between a supposed “old” and “new” Europe.

Historians will have to decide whether the Second Iraq War ended on 31 August or not. What we can presume is that the past seven-and-a-half years have represented the end of the brief unipolar period brought about by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War. US dominance will continue for some time, especially in the area of military superiority, but this open-ended war has weakened the United States and Europe, while other parts of the world have grown strongly and are now setting the international agenda. Perhaps that is why, in his speech, Obama referred to the need to restore the battered economy of the US middle classes, and to use all the elements of his country’s power to carry on leading the world, to continue to “bear the burden of promoting liberty and human dignity overseas”, as Obama said from the Oval Office. According to the President, these elements of US power include diplomacy, economic strength, the value of liberty and the power of example; it is perhaps the latter that has been most damaged in this ruinous, inconclusive war. Next stop: Afghanistan.

### Notes

- (1) <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/Centers/Saban/Iraq%20Index/index.pdf>
- (2) <http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736%2806%2969491-9/abstract>
- (3) <http://www.unhcr.org/4c11f0be9.html>
- (4) Iraq Index Archive 2010.

**Francesc Badia i Dalmases,**  
Executive Manager, CIDOB