

# **CHURCH OF ENGLAND**

## **MISSION AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS COUNCIL**

### **SUBMISSION TO THE IRAQ COMMISSION INQUIRY**

1. The Church of England welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Iraq Commission that is being facilitated by the Foreign Policy Centre, in partnership with Channel 4. The Mission and Public Affairs Council of the Church of England is the body responsible for overseeing research and comment on social and political issues on behalf of the Church. The Council comprises a representative group of bishops, clergy and lay people with interest and expertise in the relevant areas, and reports to the General Synod through the Archbishops' Council.
2. The Council notes that the remit of this Inquiry is on the scope and focus of Britain's future involvement in Iraq. As such the focus of this submission is on the following areas: the political and economic situation in Iraq and the role of UK troops in Iraq and the strategic objectives of their deployment. The submission considers these issues from the perspective of the UK's wider Middle East strategy and the impact that such a strategy has on community cohesion both here in the UK and Iraq. In so doing, the submission pays particular attention to the fragile and desperate situation of the indigenous Christian community in Iraq and how their future existence is threatened by the worsening security situation.

#### **Executive summary**

3. In this submission we argue, first, that in the context of the UK's international priorities in the Middle East:
  - any recalibrated strategy to Iraq needs to take seriously the reality that Iraq is a failed state in the grip of a sectarian civil war that threatens Iraq's territorial integrity and wider regional escalation;

- the government clarify what role the remaining British troops will play in Southern Iraq following the draw down and whether they are properly resourced to do so;
  - the government needs to develop its case much more effectively to avoid the potential propaganda victory that the draw down offers to *ihadists*;
  - given the litany of errors in planning for the post war, an independent inquiry be set up to draw out lessons to be learnt should Britain ever have cause to intervene again elsewhere in the world. (Paragraphs 5-21)
4. Second, in the context of the migration of Christians from the Middle East in general and Iraq in particular, we argue that:
- this migration, which is due to a multiplicity of factors, threatens the Church's existence as a viable and sustainable community in the region and reduces the valuable contribution that the Church makes to the diverse fabric of Middle Eastern society.
  - the continued exodus of Christians from Iraq and the wider region diminishes the Church's leverage to contribute effectively to initiatives aimed at promoting peace and reconciliation as called for by recommendation 36 of the Baker Hamilton Report.
  - that it would ease the deeply troubling situation if the British government refrained from portraying its policies as part of a wider struggle for 'our western values' inferentially against the values of Islam and the East. (Paragraphs 22-30)

### **The Government's International Priorities to the Middle East**

5. The government's White Paper of March 2006, *Active Diplomacy for a Changing World: The UK's International Priorities*, establishes a new set of strategic international priorities which build on those set out by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in its first White Paper on the UK's international priorities, 2003. Prime Minister Blair expounded further on the strategic priorities underpinning British foreign policy in his speech to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council, 1 August 2006, and in his HMS Albion lecture, 12 January 2007. The cumulative effect of these policy pronouncements was to

commit the UK to a values' based foreign policy that rejects 'benign inactivity' in favour of an interventionist strategy that confronts extremist and reactionary views in the Middle East by defeating terrorism and by promoting democracy and progress.

6. The Middle East engages every aspect of our foreign policy, not just our security with regard to conflict, proliferation and terrorism, but the security of our economy. It is a region of the world that is central to the deeper goal of building a safe, just and prosperous world for all. The growing links between domestic and international issues means that British foreign policy to the Middle East impacts as much upon the UK's well being as it does on the security and prosperity of the Middle East. This interdependence of concerns necessitates a comprehensive and integrated foreign policy that carefully balances its use of soft and hard power in a way that recognises the inter-linkage of the challenges and the diversity of Middle Eastern societies. This entails guarding against seeing the region's problems as *sui generis* and therefore beyond rationalisation, and the temptation to reduce the region's problems to over-riding explanations that legitimate simplistic policies.
  
7. Against this background, we remain concerned at the shape and direction of British foreign policy to the Middle East. While it has been right for Britain to counsel its European allies of the dangers of US isolationism, it is far from clear what political dividend Britain has accrued through its uncritical relationship with the US. British foreign policy to the Middle East has in the past appeared to accept and echo uncritically the US conflation of complex and separate issues into a 'global war on terrorism', now rephrased as 'the long war'. Despite Prime Minister Blair's 1 August 2006 Los Angeles speech, British foreign policy in the region is widely seen there as far from even-handed, fair and just in its application of the values of moderation. The renaissance of strategy called for by Mr Blair appeared, publicly at least, to rely more on hard rather than soft power. The net impact has been increased isolation in Europe and a reduction of Britain's influence and political capital in the Middle East.

8. We suggest that the expected draw down of British troops from Iraq allied to the recent political transitions in British politics provides an important opportunity for Britain to recalibrate its foreign policy to the US and Europe as well as to the Middle East. The strategic challenges identified by the 2006 White Paper will no doubt remain constant, but Prime Minister Brown will hopefully, by virtue of being able to move beyond the recent history of the Iraq war, be better positioned to affect the necessary change in British foreign policy to respond more effectively to the region's challenges. Recent statements made by the Prime Minister, allied to new Ministerial appointments to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office point to promising new developments in policy. To be meaningful, however, this must result in a change on substantive policy issues rather than merely reflecting a change in style and presentation of past policies already found wanting.

## **Iraq**

9. On 21 February 2006 the British government announced its intention to hand over to the Iraqi government responsibility for all of the southern provinces under its jurisdiction by November 2007 and to start drawing down its troops. We support the government's view that this withdrawal should be related to the situation on the ground, not held hostage to an artificial timescale. However, the government must also ensure that any withdrawal does not lead to a renewal of conflict or create a situation where those remaining British troops are not adequately equipped to provide for their own protection should they come under attack. To this end the government needs to clarify what role the remaining troops will be able to play in the South, especially on the borders with Iran, and whether they are properly resourced to do so. The recent Iranian seizure of British servicemen in the northern Gulf dramatically underlines the potential vulnerability of British forces, even when operating under a UN mandate.
10. British foreign policy in Iraq appears trapped between the intractability of the situation on the ground and the US determination to 'stay the course'. Despite the initial welcome given by the UK government to the Iraq Study Group Report it appears to have had little influence in impressing the report's

analysis and recommendations on either the American or Iraqi government. The anticipated draw down of British troops provides the government with an opportunity to recalibrate its foreign policy objectives to Iraq. In our view this needs to take as its starting point the reality that Iraq is a failed state in the grip of a sectarian civil war. There is therefore a serious threat to Iraq's territorial integrity and a continuing risk of wider regional escalation.

11. Whilst the government acknowledges the seriousness of the security situation, it has consistently refused to describe the situation as constituting a civil war. Yet by any military index the annual number of civilian casualties, even those at the lower range of estimates, exceeds the accepted casualty threshold of what constitutes a civil war. It is true the violence is fragmentary and complex, involving a multiplicity of sources. But that should not conceal the reality that the civil war is tearing apart such residual inter-communal cohesion as Iraq experienced before 2003. The nature of the violence, involving as it does extra judicial killings and torture, and the associated population movements (1.8 million internally displaced Iraqis since 2003, with an average of 45,000 Iraqis leaving their homes every month) constitute a form of 'cleansing' - the forced separation on sectarian and ethnic lines of major cities with mixed populations.
12. The UK government is right to assert that terrorism predates the 2003 Iraq war, and that the majority of the violence witnessed in Iraq is sectarian in nature. Yet, evidence suggests that Al Qaeda, having been evicted from its safe haven in Afghanistan, has taken advantage of the chaos in Iraq to set up new training grounds for *jihadist* terrorists, most notably in the Anbar Province. Arguably the greatest impediment to prospective gains in the 'war on terror' is the galvanising effect the Iraq occupation has had on terrorist recruitment, morale and capability. It has reinforced Al Qaeda's grand narrative depicting the US and the UK as seeking to establish Western hegemony in the region.
13. The radicalisation of some sections of European Muslim society, already evident prior to the Iraq war (due to issues like Israel-Palestine, Kashmir and

Chechnya) has been confirmed and intensified by the ongoing occupation of Iraq. The war has given an opportunity to radical Muslims, both in Europe and in the Middle East, to attach their own local particular concerns onto a wider global contest. There are no accurate predictions of the number of European Muslims believed to have joined the *jihad* in Iraq, but those who do return are likely to possess a significant body of knowledge and experience. Returning *jihadists* to Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia have already illustrated their appetite for destruction, as shown for example by the suicide bombings in Amman, Jordan in November 2005. Although the investigations into the terrorist attacks of July 2007 are still ongoing, the use of car bombs in London similar to those used in Iraq is an alarming and distressing development and underlines potential for 'blow back' from Iraq.

14. Against this background, British public diplomacy and the manner in which it has framed and continues to frame the strategic narrative to events in Iraq appear inadequate to the situation that has now developed. This is in part due to the flawed narrative that the government used to frame its policy decisions at the time of the 2003 Iraq war. The government has argued that its anticipated draw down of troops reflects the success of Operation Sinbad. The *jihadists* argue the drawn down is in fact a humiliating withdrawal. If the government is to avoid the potential propaganda victory that the draw down offers to the *jihadists* it will need to develop its case much more effectively.
15. The government's public reluctance to acknowledge the reality that there is a civil war has meant that its policies have sometimes appeared misguided and counterproductive. The origins of Iraq's civil war lie in the collapse of the authority and structure of the state and its administrative incapacity following the US-led invasion to provide for the security and well being of the Iraqi people. Politics in Iraq has become simultaneously more local and international, involving a dispersal of power and authority to local communities and foreign capitals. The removal of the state as a focus and instrument of identity formation has resulted in the emergence of sub-state and ethnic identities often involving self-legitimising hybrid ideologies (sectarian, religious and nationalist) backed up by militia force.

16. It is crucial to understand that religion *per se* is not the cause of the violence. The violence is a result of the lack of post-war planning prior to the invasion, resulting in misguided policies that have contributed to the hollowing out of the Iraqi state. Iraq's civil war was not an inevitable consequence of the 2003 invasion. The litany of mistakes committed in post-war planning warrant the need for an independent inquiry in order to ensure that the necessary lessons can be learnt should Britain ever have cause to intervene again elsewhere in the world.
17. The government is right to stress that Iraq's Government of National Unity is very recently formed and that governing by coalition is never easy. However, the intensive effort in 2005 to build an electoral system to empower Iraq's Government of National Unity has exacerbated the sectarian violence. The electoral system resulted in the creation of large coalitions, most of which have played to the lowest common denominator by deploying ethno-sectarian rhetoric. Repeated statements from Iraqi government ministers recognising the need for national reconciliation contrasts with the way in which government ministries continue to be run as personal and party fiefdoms, often along aggressively sectarian lines, with scarce government resources diverted to build personal and party constituencies.
18. Reversing this trend requires a strong government with a monopoly on coercion with administrative capacity to give it legitimacy. There is little evidence to suggest that such a development is imminent or likely. The Iraqi government's rejection of the underlying analysis provided by the Baker-Hamilton underlines how elusive national reconciliation remains. It is difficult therefore to see how the deployment of additional US troops to the country can offer anything other than a temporary relief from the chaos. Whether or not there is progress towards national reconciliation, any Iraqi government is likely to want military and economic assistance from the broader international community for the foreseeable future. The mix between economic and military assistance might change, but Iraq's dependency upon the international community will not.

19. The primary objective of future British foreign policy to Iraq must be to ensure that the chaos in Iraq does not spill over into a broader conflict that risks politicising further the growing Sunni-Shiite divide in the region. This scenario is best avoided by intensifying the efforts towards national reconciliation in Iraq. In the absence of such progress, active consideration needs to be given to whether a move towards a negotiated federal structure might be a desirable solution. Ultimately, however, given that Iraq as a territorial unit is a recent and artificial construction that has only been maintained through strong government, the continuing absence of a strong and effective government in Iraq might necessitate a managed partition of the country.
20. Although not an ideal solution, a managed partition involving Iraq's neighbours would be preferable to the current *ad hoc* and bloody partition which risks seeing Iraq's factions being used as vehicles for a proxy war between Shiites and Sunnis in the region. As the Baker-Hamilton report noted, whatever the future status of Iraq, it must involve the active support and participation of Iraq's neighbours buttressed by a re-energised commitment from the wider international community. Similar steps were taken with Dayton to provide for Bosnia, and a comparable agreement with Afghanistan's neighbours underpins the status and borders of that country.
21. The Baker-Hamilton report underlined the importance of negotiating with Iran other than on the streets of Baghdad. It is neither in the US nor Iran's interests for Iraq to descend further into civil war. Given that Iran, of all of Iraq's neighbours, has the most leverage in Iraq, it is encouraging that the US participated in a regional conference in Baghdad involving Iran and Syria and that subsequent regional conferences have since taken place. This needs to be built upon with the hope of developing a more comprehensive regional security framework to manage Iraq. The focus of these conferences is rightly on Iraq, but it is to be hoped that they will provide the basis for more constructive engagement on other issues, most notably Iran's nuclear programme.

## **Christian Minorities in Iraq and the Middle East**

22. This submission draws upon the multiple relationships that the Church of England has with the Middle East in general and the Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East in particular. The latter is a Province of the Anglican Communion stretching from Iran in the East to Algeria in the West, and Cyprus in the North to Somalia in the South. Geographically it is the largest and most diverse Anglican Province. The Province consists of some 30,000 practising Anglicans. There are churches throughout this area, mostly looked after by indigenous clergy, as well as schools, hospitals and other foundations - many of them in places where poverty, civil strife and religious problems are commonplace.
  
23. The Church of England through its dioceses, mission agencies and development agencies supports the ministry and mission of the Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East. A number of Church of England dioceses have active companion links with particular churches or diocese in the region. Mission agencies such as the Church Mission Society, the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel and the Mothers' Union provide financial assistance to particular projects like the Ahliyyah Girls School in Amman, Jordan, the Princess Basma Centre for the Handicapped in Jerusalem and kindergarten facilities associated with St George's, Baghdad and the Ahti-Arab Hospital in Gaza.
  
24. The Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East has always been affected by political developments in the region. However, developments in the Middle East since September 2000, including amongst others the second intifada, the geopolitical fallout of 9/11, the regional instability caused by the 2003 Iraq war and more recently the 2006 Lebanon war have all placed severe additional strains upon the indigenous Church. The most visible expression of this strain is the accelerated migration of Christians of all traditions away from their homelands.
  
25. The migration of Christians from the Middle East is most marked in Iraq. Although no independent surveys have been undertaken into the specific

migration flows of Christians from Iraq, evidence provided to us by reputable local Church contacts both in Iraq, Jordan and Syria suggest that a disproportionate number of the 40-50,000 refugees who flee Iraq every month are Christians. The cold blooded assassination in July 2007 of a Catholic (Chaldean) priest and three sub deacons in Mosul illustrate quite clearly how the small Christian minority find itself increasingly vulnerable and caught up in the sectarian violence which is now spreading from the south to the north of the country. Regular reports provided by Canon Andrew White, the Anglican Vicar at St George's Church, Baghdad, underline that this climate of harassment and violence towards Iraq's Christian minority is not isolated but all pervasive.

26. Following representations from the Iraqi Christian communities in the UK we have sought clarification of the government's policies towards those Iraqis who are seeking refuge or asylum in the UK, or who have sought help from UK embassies in countries neighbouring Iraq. It remains our understanding that the government continues to see the Kurdish area of Iraq as a safe area for returned refugees, even though virtually all interested parties outside of government dispute that judgment. As a number of local church contacts point out the UK government is morally obliged, because of its involvement in prosecuting this war, to take a lead role in addressing the fall out, specially the humanitarian situation regarding those fleeing the conflict. Against this background we suggest that further effort should be made by the government to resolve the status of Iraqi refugees who are here in the UK not least by ensuring that they receive a dignified level of support.

27. This migration threatens the Church's existence as a viable and sustainable community in the region. It substantially reduces the valuable contribution that the Church makes to the diverse fabric of Middle Eastern society. Left unchecked it risks reinforcing the myth, both in the East and the West, that the underlying tensions in the region are part of an irreconcilable clash of faiths and cultures. The situation on the ground is somewhat different from that envisaged by Mr Blair in his 1 August 2006 speech in Los Angeles.

28. There are strategic dimensions to this development. The Iraq Study Group noted, in recommendation 36 of its report, the contribution that religious communities and leaders can make in fostering dialogue and reconciliation across the sectarian divide. One example of this contribution is provided by the Maronite Church in Lebanon, which was widely acknowledged as offering the most promising of schemes for a lasting peace during last summer's conflict. A further example is the work of the Iraqi Institute of Peace, which is now one of the most established non-governmental organisations in Iraq. Working at the invitation of the Coalition Provisional Authority this Institute was set up in 2005 with the assistance of the Foundation for Relief and Reconciliation in the Middle East with a view to bringing together the myriad of religious communities in an integrated effort to counter the ethnic, tribal and religious conflict that threatens to undermine the country's transition to democracy
29. We in the Church of England remain committed to developing inter-religious dialogue in the region and supportive of efforts to form inter-religious councils in particular countries such as Iraq and Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. However, we fear that the continued exodus of Christians from Iraq and the wider region diminishes the Church's leverage to contribute effectively to initiatives aimed at promoting peace and reconciliation. Efforts to strengthen the position of the local Church through re-energising the diverse set of relationships that exist remain a key priority. However, while an important act of solidarity such efforts can offer little more than a band aid given the multiple problems that the local Church faces.
30. The Archbishop of Canterbury, following his pilgrimage to the Holy Land in December 2006, has expressed his concern that Western interventions in the Middle East, most notably in Iraq risked jeopardising further the position of Middle Eastern Christians by reinforcing the perception of them as supporters of a crusading West. In this statement he was repeating the concerns expressed four years ago, in October 2002, in the Church of England's House of Bishops' submission to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee. It would ease this deeply troubling situation if the British government would refrain from

portraying its policies as part of a wider struggle for ‘our Western values’,  
inferentially against the values of Islam and the East.

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