

Bratislava Dialogues on Iraq:

“We can not wait until regional conflicts move closer to Europe”

Short Conference Report

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Introduction: Iraq as hot issue of Slovak parliamentary election campaign



1) The Bratislava Dialogues on Iraq is the initiative of the Bratislava-based Pontis Foundation to increase awareness about Iraq (and the Middle East) in Slovakia.

The conference organized on June 8, 2006 took place only a few days after the leader of the oppositional social-democratic SMER party announced to withdraw Slovak forces from Iraq in case SMER will be able to form a new government after the parliamentary election of Slovakia scheduled for June 17, 2006.

Although the election campaign made Iraq a hot issue in Slovakia suddenly, the conference was planned by the Pontis Foundation already two months before the

announcement about Slovak troops.

2) Most importantly, the conference first time drew together key Slovak governmental and non-governmental institutions actively involved in Iraq to discuss assistance from Slovakia (and Europe) together with representatives of Iraqi civil society. The sudden interest toward Iraq made possible that more than 50 people from the academic and diplomatic community, representatives of Slovak political parties and NGOs as well as media came to discuss current situation in Iraq and ways of Slovak involvement.

Key findings: Civil society building a successful project

3) Building civil society of Iraq was evaluated as a successful project by Iraqi participants, mainly because the concept of NGO work is focusing on increasing participation of Iraqi people to solve core problems of society. Moreover, Iraqi NGOs are challenging the implementation of key values of Iraqi society through modern methods of outreach and addressing the current security problems with peaceful facilitation among various groups.

4) Especially the position of Iraqi women has strengthened comparing to the past throughout their engagement with civil society organizations. Women of Iraq are now more capable to influence legal and political environment, protecting their own rights – issues that weren't possible before. Still, lots of further efforts by civil society organizations are required to address various stereotypes of Iraqi society. New women-related topics have been recently opened in the Iraqi society such as home violence and revenge killing, deeply rooted in the Iraqi society.

5) There is overall lack of access of public in Iraq to legal environment, lack of information about laws and its implementation in practice, and missing more information and inspiration from other successful transition experiences from countries like Slovakia.

6) Nevertheless, the conference in Bratislava confirmed that Slovak experience in assistance to civil society in the Balkans can be used also in Iraq. The Pontis Foundation have already trained more than 60 NGO leaders in the area of Baghdad and Nassyriah, and developed their capacity to prepare good projects and civic education initiatives for their communities

7) Iraqi NGO leaders also stressed the need for external help in rebuilding Iraq and were concerned with lack of available funding after change of US priorities and their re-focus on security.

8) In this matter, Iraqi NGOs emphasized the role of Slovak assistance, as a member of the European Union, in re-building Iraq. According to the representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Slovakia is actively taking part in debates about the EU assistance package for Iraq currently being finalized by the EC, and promotes its focus on building civil society.

9) Iraqi NGO leaders urged Slovak policymakers to lobby in Brussels to increase support to civil society of Iraq from the EU, especially in the form of small grants schemes to local NGOs. According to them the role of Europe must be as large as possible; especially given the overwhelming positive reception of Iraqi society toward European countries opposing the US led military action.

Iraq and Slovakia: Transition experience matters

10) Over the two years engagement of the Pontis Foundation in Iraq local NGO leaders showed great commitment to learn from Slovak and Eastern European transition experience in the last 15 years. Formal links built between Czechoslovakia and Iraq proved to be a good social foundation for this engagement, but mostly the experience of the most important post-communist transition issues of Slovakia toward Iraq, such as building democratic institution, dialogue between minorities and influential civil society paved the way toward a new quality of cooperation.

11) Slovakia renewed diplomatic relations with Bagdad in June 2003, and since then supported democratization and reform process in this country, and it has a clear humanitarian mandate for its military unit in Iraq, which was widen recently to include training program for the new Iraqi security forces. "*We cannot wait until regional conflicts and threats move closer to Europe*", Vladimír Jakabčín, Director General of the Ministry of Defense of Slovakia explained the rationale for Slovak military presence in Iraq.

12) In addition to the civil society and military assistance, the Slovak Investment and Trade Development Agency (SARIO) reviews investment opportunities for Slovak companies in Iraq in energy and construction industry. The planned visit of delegation of Iraqi companies to Bratislava in the near future would help to create reasonable investments strategies for Slovak business.

Recommendations

13) The European Union and its member states should strongly consider to step in as donor to support Iraqi civil society through small grants schemes.

14) The European Union and its member states should support to increase inter-regional contacts and exchange between Iraq and Europe at all possible level of societies.