



International Affairs Forum speaks about Iraq border issues with Mr. Paul Hughes, the Iraq program officer in the Peace and Stability Operations Program for the US Institute for Peace. Mr. Hughes is also the Army's senior military fellow to the Institute for National Security Studies of the National Defense University. By Winston Harris. (7/12/2005)

Mr. Paul Hughes: So what are we talking about today?

International Affairs Forum: Iraqi border security.

Mr. Hughes: As you can see from the map behind you, I'm an Army guy so I love maps, some parts of Iraq are as flat as a table and some as rugged a set of mountains as you could imagine. There are very porous borders and virtually anybody who wants to cross them can cross them; and it's been that way for years. It probably goes back to the ancient trade routes, the fabled Silk Road with Marco Polo; the routes Alexander the Great took as he conquered Babylon and then moved in to attack the Persian Empire. He actually went through a mountain pass in the southern Zagros Mountains people didn't know existed. He took his whole army through there and surprised the Persians, one of the most brilliant strategic moves that he made. The borders have always been artificial, especially along the Arab states, Syria Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. Along the Iranian side, they have been more historical, and that has been based on the ethnicity: the Arabs, Persians. Believe me they are two different categories, and Americans don't understand that. They lump them together because they're all Muslims, but that's like lumping Christians all together despite their various nationalities. So why do you control a border? Why does the nation want to control a border?

IA-Forum: National security purposes.

Mr. Hughes: That's one. But more importantly in today's world it's a matter of tariffs, it's money. Always follow the money. You want to know how people are really empowered, follow the money. It's a matter of collecting taxes on imports coming in, denying things coming in as a national security issue. Control the flow of refugees in a very volatile region. Some people establish borders to keep their own people in. You have to look at the value of the countries that are involved; you have to look at the region that's involved. In Africa, borders are almost irrelevant. In central Africa, because there are no borders, if there's an Ebola outbreak in eastern Zaire or Congo; the tribes just get up and move. There is nothing there to bar them.

That's been the way from Turkey all the way down to around Kuwait. Tribes just move back and forth; always have and still do today. What provides the security is really the tribal network. Tribes extend across borders. One thing Saddam used to do is he used to pay the tribes off. If a sheik would take care of his area, and ensured that no one caused any mischief for Baghdad; then the sheik would get money and would then distribute it through his own tribal network. That's broken down now, because the United States stopped that practice; much to its regret now. We're getting smart about it now and trying to reengage these people, and obviously the government in Baghdad's trying to reengage these people, the sheiks. Along the Iranian border, it's much more different. Along that border you'll find minefields that have been put there to keep not only the border secure, but militants out that are coming in from Iran.

So if you want to secure the borders, you've got to understand why it is you want to secure them. Then you have to organize, and that's where the country has really had a long standing problem, how they organize the securing of the borders. By organizing we're talking about not only making sure that you've got the right ministries in charge of it but that they are talking to each other in interagency process. In Iraq that didn't exist, interagency processing was just nonfunctioning. And it was due to the corrupt nature of Saddam's regime. Police in Iraq were always the scum suckers of society; they were always the bottom dwellers. Hence the police were the ones who wound up being the most corrupt, because they had to make a living and they weren't getting it from their pay check. Border police were pretty much the same way. The border police were actively involved in smuggling and that's being changed. But it's being changed slowly. You can't expect that to be fixed overnight.

The war has, in its aftermath and insurgency, spawned the trade across borders of a huge black market in weapons, obviously foreign fighters coming in; a black market in things that the Iraqis want. It's also opened up the borders to become new routes for transporting drugs from Afghanistan, which is a new issue. In fact Iraqi officials are beginning to see a rise in the increase of heroin among Iraqis. That's a major issue.

The current plan is that the Ministry of the Interior is in charge of the border police with the US helping to train the border police. The US military is actually overseeing the training; the US military is not doing the training. They are prohibited by law (The Foreign Assistance Act of 1961) from training foreign police forces. So the Department of Justice has a role to play in it [training Iraqi Border Police], Department of Homeland Security has a role to play in it. There is no corresponding Department of Homeland Security in Iraq; it's the Ministry of the Interior, which heads all police functions in Iraq.

Then you've got to figure out how you link in the tariffs, the collection of taxes that come into the tariff collecting system that the Ministry of Finance runs. I don't know enough on how they're doing that these days. When I was there it was so chaotic that people said forget it, just let it go. Another major issue in Iraq is the issue of oil smuggling and how that's being managed. That has been a practice for many years under the UN sanctions; when oil was smuggled all the time and that's an old habit that dies hard. The Kurds were involved in it; down

south the Arabs were involved in it. So how do you control the pipelines across the borders? How are those regulated and how do you measure what's being sent out that you're collecting money on? I don't know. But that's another issue for them to have to contend with.

Another issue is how does Iraq coordinate this with other members of the region? If you're going to control your borders, you better make sure your neighbor understands how you're going to control your borders; because you don't want to be doing something that's counterproductive to both countries' interest. So Iraq is trying to actively engage its neighbors on border issues. I think they're doing okay with the Turks, there's improvement with the Iranians although it's going to take a long time for that to get fixed. Kuwait is definitely fixed, and that's a result of the 1991 Gulf War. Saudi Arabia, I'm not convinced of; neither am I convinced that Syria is doing anything to control their borders and that's where a lot of our problems are.

IA-Forum: News articles have recently claimed that Syria is having problems with the foreign fighters. That the Islamists are now biting the hand that feeds them and in response the Syrians have launched a new campaign against the foreign fighters on the border. Do you think this signals a policy shift in Iraq that will lead to the Syrian government warming up to Iraq?

Mr. Hughes: Iraq and Syria have had contentious relations for many years. It goes back to Saddam and Hafez Assad [the late former President of Syria]. Bashar Assad [the son of the former president and current President of Syria] is trying to pull Syria, at least allegedly, into the modern world. But he's got a lot of problems. There are two camps of thought on Syria. That Bashar Assad is actually trying to make things move forward for Syria and he wants to engage the world; but there are still too much of the old guard left that are really calling the shots. Then there are those who are saying no, he's just the same as his father; he's not going to make any true commitment to improving relations. I don't know. The latest issue of Smithsonian Magazine has a very interesting feature on Syria and its current political dynamics as viewed by citizens of Syria.

But Syria needs to get serious about its borders. Its attempt to control its borders with its army is going to fall flat; principally because Syria's army isn't worth the powder to blow away. I was with their division; I saw their division trying to do things in the 1991, when it was part of the coalition for Desert Storm, and it was the weak sister of all of the Arab armies. In fact it made me wonder why people thought the Israelis were such a tough unit; because what they were fighting was just nothing. Arab armies are typically pretty poor armies and it hasn't changed in Syria. The fact that they withdrew from Lebanon and they've got a lot of troops back home now doesn't mean they have a greater capacity to control on their borders. It's very easy to sneak in and out; and it's very difficult to control. We don't have enough forces there to control these borders; certainly the Iraqis, don't yet and certainly won't for a few years. So that border's going to be a problem.

The way you stop the foreign fighters from coming across is by attacking the money. Find the money and stop the money. Because somebody's buying these guys' airline tickets, somebody's paying the bribes to get them through immigration in Damascus. Somebody's paying the money to put them up, transport them, to equip them, to sneak them across, to pay border guards. Stop the money and you'll see a major halt in the flow of Islamic Revolutionaries trying to get into Iraq.

IA-Forum: Do you have any idea who the source of this money might be?

Mr. Hughes: There's a variety of sources. Some of it's funded by Islamic movements; you know Osama bin Laden still has a lot of money at his disposal, certainly not at a bank account marked Osama bin Laden. But the Ba'athists snuck lots of money out too. Billions of dollars were taken out of Baghdad before it fell. We think we caught most of the 9 billion dollars that was stolen from the bank, but I don't think we got it all. There is probably two or three billion that still got out. In that part of the world, when you're talking about \$20 being an excessively huge amount of money, several hundred thousand dollars will go a long way towards making things happen. So find the money and stop it. But to find the money and stop it in the Arab world is very difficult, because banking practices are not like what we have back here. The Hawala banking system, or money transfer system, is so opaque that it's almost impossible to control. The banking systems of Syria are virtually nonexistent. They're trying to establish western style banks in Syria, but it's going to be a long time before those things really take hold; and certainly no one is going to put their money in a bank that is under scrutiny from legal periodic reviews. So how do you stop the money? I'm not sure how you do that but somebody has to figure it out. That goes to the lack of intelligence we have throughout the region, that we don't have enough Arabic speakers, and folks who are smart enough with the culture who can work with Arab nations who can stymie this. It is in no nation's interests to have foreign fighters roaming around, looking for reasons to die to join Allah. Frankly I think Saudi Arabia is quite happy to see their angry men leave and go to Iraq; because that takes them off the streets of Riyadh.

IA-Forum: What about those angry young men becoming battle hardened warriors in Iraq then returning back home to cause problems?

Mr. Hughes: That has been a concern especially to the Europeans and the North Africans, because there are large numbers of North Africans that are coming in. Saudis who go in tend to stay. But there are a large number of Yemenis and Jordanians coming in. People are concerned about this; we don't need this to become another Afghanistan which became the training ground for the people who went to Chechnya, Georgia, or the Central Asian nations. We don't need those guys going back home and starting problems.

IA-Forum: I realize that the foreign fighters in Iraq constitute a small portion of the Insurgency, but yet are responsible for much of the most violent attacks. If their presence in Iraq can be minimized, what effect will that have on the overall insurgency?

Mr. Hughes: It would probably get rid of a lot of the car bombings. The Iraqi mentality is not one bent on suicide. The foreign fighters coming in intend to die. They're never planning to leave Iraq alive. Our job is to help them meet Allah, I guess. We would be able to see a huge reduction in the car bombings and suicide bombings in Iraq. It would help reduce the cost on the Iraqi side. You have to understand the mentality of these suicide bombers. They don't care about killing other Muslims. In their world view, if you're a good Muslim, if you happen to be killed in someone's attack, that's ok; you're going to see Allah sooner and you're going to be fine. If you're a bad Muslim, you go to Hell; and they don't care. They just don't care about other people. They don't want to give other people choices. That's a significant issue, because when you look at the big picture of Iraq, what the United States and its allies are trying to do is to give Iraqis a chance to make choices about their future, something they've never had before. That's what stirs the Jihaddis hatred. They don't want people to have choices. Choices were taken away from mankind when the Koran was compiled. Because it tells you everything you need to know. It's the Jihaddi view point that says the Koran is the fountain of all knowledge. So you have no more need to make choices. If you have an issue, turn to the Koran, the answer's there. So that's what the Jihaddis are most afraid of, that this will create conditions for people to have choices and perhaps stray from the true faith. That's not acceptable in their view.

IA-Forum: Any idea just how many foreign fighters we are talking about here?

Mr. Hughes: Well it varies. But over the year, the number of foreign fighters in Iraq has increased from about 300 to upwards of right around 1,000. They are not a significant part of the insurgency. This insurgency is basically a nationalistic insurgency; and Iraq is an extremely nationalistic country. Wherever I traveled in Iraq, Iraqis always said first "I'm an Iraqi," and then they'd say "I'm an Arab or a Shia or a Kurd or whatever." They always say first "I'm an Iraqi." They believe in Iraq. If you go to the history of the 1980-1988 war between Iraq and Iran, one of the things Khomeini [Iranian mullah who led the 1979 Iranian Revolution] was interested in doing was getting the Shia to come over to his side. He thought religion would trump nationalism but it doesn't work in Iraq. A lot of the Iraqi Shia clerics, who lived in Iran during the Saddam years, have come back to Iraq and they do not intend to recreate Tehran on the banks of the Tigris. It's just not going to happen; because they saw how the Iranians screwed it up. It's understood that there needs to be some sort of divide between church and state. Not as much as what we have however, where we have a wall. One of the big issues in the Iraqi Constitution is the role of Sharia, as to whether it will be

THE basis for the legal code or A basis for the legal code. That's something they're grappling with right now.

IA-Forum: Speaking of the legal code, has the United States and its allies had any more success in bringing the Sunnis back into the Iraqi government?

Mr. Hughes: Yes, recently there have been a lot of reports that the Sunnis are participating. The Sunnis have 15 slots on the Constitutional Commission, in addition to the two they had before; which is good. It brings it more into a balance based on demography. They've also had some of their clerical associations issue a *fatwa* saying it is the duty of Sunnis in Iraq to vote in the next elections. They clearly recognize they were missing the boat in January; and they don't intend for that to happen again. This is no different than watching the Republicans and the Democrats vie for representation on some kind of committee. People want to stack the decks so that they get their agenda passed. It's no different than how the Arab Sunni were acting in Baghdad. So people had to make this compromise until they finally figured out how they were going to do it. So that's now been done. I have high hopes now for the constitution. Iraq's not going to break apart into civil war, despite some people saying the Kurds ought to break off. That to me is pure lunacy, and if you look at how the oil system is set up, it would be crazy for the Kurds to break off because they don't have any oil; and in my view would be another Biafra. Like Biafra was back in the early 1970s, they'll just be cut off by all the people who hate them. That's not the way to do it. The current Kurdish leadership, President Barzani and President Talabani understand that, and they intend for the Kurds to remain part of Iraq; which is the wise move.

IA-Forum: Speaking of the Kurds, they have quite a large paramilitary force, the Peshmerga. Is there a way for the United States to utilize them for security purposes?

Mr. Hughes: That's an idea that gets bounced around a lot. But if you want to use the Peshmerga for that, then you're going to have to use the Badr Brigades. I think you're opening a can of worms. The Peshmerga are an honorable organization. They fought to defend their people from the atrocities of Saddam. They're tough as nails. I've got a great deal of respect for the Peshmerga. But time marches on, and I think their time is coming past now. There needs to be some process implemented that will demobilize the Peshmerga, recognize them for their contributions to the country, and then give them the choices of entering into the Iraqi Army forces as regular soldiers or being retrained to do something else; become productive members of society. It's a proposition that's a very expensive one, and certainly Iraq can't afford to do it by itself, but it's one I think the international community can take on and really help Iraq to get rid of the militias. There is no case of a modern democracy, with the typical tools of sovereignty at its disposal, i.e. its own military force, police force, and legal code,

that tolerate the existence of unregulated militias. It just doesn't work. It's a bad mix. So if Iraq is going to become a new Republic, this needs to get fixed.

IA-Forum: Going back to the border issue, recently the United States launched a series of operations in the Western al-Anbar province and at the same time, we're seeing fewer car bombs. How successful have these operations been?

Mr. Hughes: It's an illusion. What has caused Baghdad to become more stable, in terms of a reduction in suicide bombings, has been the recent offensive that the Third Infantry division and the Iraqi police have been conducting for the past 6 weeks, Operation Lightning; which just came to a conclusion. The offensives in al-Anbar have been successful in terms of disrupting the re-supply of people going to Baghdad. The material is still inside Iraq. You have to picture Iraq, a country the size of California, where every public school house you went into had artillery shells stacked in it. The number of munitions that are out there, loose and uncontrolled, is staggering. The country is the dream of everybody who supports the Second Amendment. Everybody owns guns, and lots of them. It's part of the culture. To try and get hold of the munitions is a significant challenge for this new government. The problem with the offensives out west, and the offensives throughout Iraq, is that we're playing a game of whack-a-mole. We whack them in one place, they move away, then we move on; and as soon as we leave, they pop up again. The trick is that military hard power is only part of the solution. You have to follow through with soft power. You have to come in with a rule of law system; police who can enforce the laws, courts that adjudicate cases, prisons that lock the bad guys away. You have to come in with the means to establish basic services for the Iraqis in the area. If you look at the polls, the number one need of the Iraqis, especially the IRI Polls, is electricity. That is their top concern, followed by unemployment, followed by security. They understand electricity is very important to them. Now that creates a lot of security issues; how do you protect the transmission lines, power stations, and the oil distribution system. Their electricity is generated by burning oil, so if the oil gets disrupted, electricity gets disrupted. Conversely if electricity gets disrupted, how will all the oil public stations run? So it's a vicious cycle. My point to your question though is that you cannot rely on the military to be the sole solution. There are different ways to help solve these issues. You need people who understand the local situation, the systemic issues related to the people in that situation, and you bring in a comprehensive solution set. The military shows up and conducts an operation; and where the US military physically is, we control the situation. We keep the insurgents away there; but we don't have enough people in Iraq to sit everywhere and keep the insurgents away everywhere. So as soon as we leave, they pop back up again, unless there are determined Iraqis who follow in on the heels of the American-Iraqi operations. That's where we have a problem right now. The best we can hope to do right now with our military in Iraq is to give breathing space to the Iraqi organizations that are being stood up: the government, the military, the police, and the courts; so that they don't get destroyed in the process of trying to mature. They're at the crawling stage right

now, not even the walking stage and it will be years before they're at the running stage; where we can leave. I really think 2013 is going to be the turning point for us.

IA-Forum: Is the United States using enough "soft power" to get the job done in Iraq?

Mr. Hughes: We got off to a bad start. We got off to a terrible start because we couldn't put enough people with the right skill sets into Iraq, when we first went in. We needed lawyers, experts in governance, people who could talk to the Iraqis, micro-grant experts who could come in and reinvigorate the middle class. We didn't have that. We didn't have anybody outside of Baghdad who could effectively coordinate with the military to try to come up with solutions. That's why General Petraeus, of the 101<sup>st</sup> in Mosul, started what he did because Bremer couldn't put anybody up there. He had no people to put up there, because we weren't getting volunteers. The military doesn't have to worry about getting volunteers, you can just assign a soldier and send them there and they go and do the job. But the Department of State had nobody. They didn't have enough people to go in there and it was dangerous; nobody likes to go into a dangerous situation. If you believe in the mission, then you've got to do something. Americans are risk averse in some regards, they don't mind the military going in there, but that's their job. But for civilians, they weren't prepared for it. It goes back to this notion that we really didn't do a good job planning. Despite whatever anyone over at OSD (Office of Secretary of Defense) claims; we never had a plan for post-conflict reconstruction. I was the guy who was trying to build the plan but was told not to by people in OSD. It's one of the many sins of OSD.

IA-Forum: What was the reason for not having a plan?

Mr. Hughes: Because the Presidential Directive that directed post conflict planning in Iraq gave all responsibility to the Department of Defense. And the Department of Defense did not want to open it up to interagency discussions of any substance. If you build a plan for post conflict reconstruction, you have to, by definition, make it an interagency plan. This was during the day when the Department of Defense and the Department of State were at each others throats about what to do with Iraq. The Department of Defense knew how they were going to handle Iraq - however Ahmed Chalabi said handle Iraq - that's what the Department of Defense was going to do. If Doug Fife wants to argue about it I welcome him to come see me, and we'll argue. It was a sin; it was almost criminal in my view.

IA-Forum: Going back to what you previously said about not withdrawing until 2013; the Administration has announced that by 2006, the US wants a large portion of troops back home. Is this a good move or just politically motivated?



Mr. Hughes: It's contingency planning. American forces over there are like having a virus in your system: it's going to get attacked. In the Arab world, the US military is not welcomed. The Iraqis understand why we are there, they would also like for us to be gone. They are very schizophrenic about our presence. That's understandable. That's why we can't increase the force structure that we have over there. But now let's look at the US side of the issue. How would you increase the force structure over there? There are no more forces left. We have one more rotation from reserve components that we can use over there. That's it. Then you're going to have to change US national law or Defense Department policy and start recalling National Guardsmen, who have already been over there. And that would be breaking a lot of bonds that the Defense Department and Federal Government have with State Governments. You have to look at it in perspective of what the States are saying, we need our National Guard troops home to take care of forest fires, hurricanes, and tornadoes; it's that time of year for us here in the States. Those guys have been used in emergencies, now they are in Iraq. They are talking about bringing it down by about 50%. But there is still a great deal of discussion going on between the Pentagon, CENTCOM, and the Headquarters in Baghdad on how to do this. If you brought it down to 50%, you would still have an adequate amount of troops to patrol Baghdad and to do the training mission. But essentially we wouldn't have a lot of troops out in the field doing things. However, it might be predicated on how we turn over the control of Baghdad to the Iraqis. If we can get out of the major urban areas of Mosul, Baghdad, and to some extent Ramadi; that would really reduce the visibility of US forces. It wouldn't ensure that we wouldn't still be attacked, but it would give us the ability to go after these guys out in the deserts and rout them out there. I'm not quite sure what we'd really be rooting out, we would have to interdict lines of communication back into Syria and wherever else these guys are being re-supplied. In that part of the world, the sea the insurgents swim in is the general population. It's a very urbanized society, most of Iraq's population lives in towns of 100,000 or more. These guys can hide very easily in there. One of the issues the new government has to tackle is that a significant number of the Sunni population is sitting on the fence. They're not making a commitment to the government because they're scared about their own security. In that regard they can become passive supporters of the insurgency. So you've got to convince those people to become active supporters of the government.

IA-Forum: With the notable exception of Turkey, none of Iraq's neighbors are true democracies. Have bordering nations attempted to stymie US efforts to democratize Iraq?

Mr. Hughes: In Kuwait we've just had a women's rights movement. That is a particularly important facet to look at, whether they are liberated or not, since they're 50% of the population. Saudi Arabia is still way behind, even though they've had some municipal elections. Jordan hasn't moved ahead too much, I think that they permit municipal and national elections, but that's it. I think

women have the right to vote, but I could be wrong on Jordan. Syria is a dictatorship. Forget it. Turkey is very modern. In Iran, the women vote, the men vote, it's a matter of how the voting lists are constructed. That's the role of the Supreme Council. In Iran, the common person on the street admires the Western World but they don't want to see Iranian national interests trampled.

IA-Forum: Is it fair to say that democracy is the cure to Islamist Totalitarianism?

Mr. Hughes: When I traveled around Iraq, I asked Iraqis what they thought democracy meant. Every Iraqi I asked gave me a different answer. So they don't know what democracy is. But they're willing to try it; it's got to be better than what they had before that's the way they see it. Is it the cure? Again, what's democracy? From a Western perspective what's democracy? The democracy of France, Germany, or the UK is different from what we have here in the US. The issue is, how well can the Sunnis express their needs, their concerns, and have a choice in saying who governs them. Now if that's a broad outline of democracy, that's fine. That's what they need. Look at democracy in Afghanistan; how it's taking hold, it's certainly not the way we would do it here in the States. The idea of a Loya Jirga is not something we would sign up for here in the United States. But, democratic values will be very important in defeating fundamentalism. But it's going to be a long fight, a generational fight. It's going to take a new generation of Iraqis to get comfortable with these freedoms that they've been given. It's going to take another generation to really fix all the problems in Iraq. It's a long struggle; and it's not one America can walk away from. America has to create a more enduring political will; the willingness to commit resources, blood and treasure, to this enterprise. This is the modern era's Peloponnesian War.

IA-Forum: Thank you very much for your time Mr. Hughes.

Comments? Send them to [editor@ia-forum.org](mailto:editor@ia-forum.org)

