

*Richard A. Couto*

## The Incidental Liberation of Iraq

by  
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No one in Iraq or the U.S. believes that the primary intention of U.S. military action in Iraq was liberation. Yet, citizens of both nations need to unite to make it happen—Iraqis as an opportunity to avoid neo-colonization and achieve some form of just and democratic self-rule and the U.S. as reparations for a misguided and dangerous preemptive invasion that is likely to exacerbate Middle East violence and instability. The U.S. Left cannot afford to gloat at the blunders of the Bush administration or hope for its failure. The stakes are far too high. The Left has to call upon those Democrats who can summon the courage to chart a new path to liberation, to face up to the deceptions that have brought us to this place, and to avoid the continuing deceptions about reconstruction.

Almost universally, anyone in Baghdad will give you three reasons for the U.S. invasion: Israeli security; control of Iraqi oil; and weakening the Arab world. They appear as three faces of the underlying premise of U.S. policy towards Israeli security—no two Arab nations should equal Israel in military capacity. Iraq, with its oil wealth, had built one of the world's largest armies, had the funds to support others, and Saddam, after 1991, could no longer be trusted to stay in line with US policy towards Israel.

People in the U.S., thanks to the state-supporting media, are far more divided in opinion about the reasons for the US attack on Iraq. Among a list of rationale de jour's, we find: Iraq posed an imminent threat from weapons of mass destruction; Iraq would be an eventual nuclear threat; Saddam had ties to Al-Qaeda.

As the U.S. administration's rationales fade from credibility, into a place between "technically correct" (Rumsfeld) and not "totally outrageous" (Powell), three conclusions are clear.

- Iraqi perceptions of U.S. intentions forge a more convincing logic that connects 9/11 to our invasion and occupation of Iraq. They coincide with the Defense Department's neo-conservatives' position to drain the swamp that breeds terrorism. This logic proceeds from the premise that Islamic terrorism has its base in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Control of Iraq oil cuts off supplies to Palestinian organizations and makes it easier to impose a U.S./Israeli peace.
- There is almost universal sentiment that it is good that Saddam Hussein is gone. Dividing that sentiment are reservations about the illegal and unjustified means to that end; concerns with the U.S. intentions to impose its own regime on Iraq; and worries that the U.S. Office of Coalitional Provisional Authority [OCPA] does not have the competence or will to restore basic services—electricity and water and police protection;
- and the liberation of Iraq, originally incidental to our purpose, has taken on immense importance to end the U.S. march towards endless preemptive war and to prevent an accidental empire whose chief exports are “death and violence” as the solemn ending of Woodward's book, *Bush at War*, envisions. Far from draining the swamp of terrorism, these outcomes will fill and expand it.

If Iraq is to reach liberation, three impediments, rooted in OCPA's performance up to present, will have to be removed. First, some degree of normal service and security needs to be restored just to demonstrate OCPA's competence. Second, OCPA will have to join the rest of us in a world that is gray-hued and not starkly black and white. Third, OCPA will have to end the U.S. hubris that it can liberate Iraq without the aid of the UN and its member states who failed their responsibility.

### Competence

People compare OCPA's performance unfavorably with Saddam's regime's in 1991 when electrical power was restored within a month of the end of the war and despite much more damage. At best, eight hours of electrical power are available per day, rotated through the city in 2 hour blocks. This provides inadequate power for cooling Baghdad's 115° and for pumping clean water. Similarly, people compare the fear they had of Saddam's secret police and the

diffuse fear they have now. Everyone has a story of a family member or neighbor robbed in their home or assaulted in the street. Women face threats from carjacking and sexual assault never known before. In the matters of safety and public services, the general assessment is that things are far worse than ever before. In effect, OCPA has turned all of Baghdad into a U.S. inner city with the variant of occupation military forces who do not speak the residents' language.

Waleed Shamil, professor of theatre arts at the University of Baghdad, makes the point even as he qualifies the severity of these problems. He thinks back to his eight years of study and teaching and assesses Baghdad's problems as no worse than the worst neighborhoods of LA at that time.

Imagine any U.S. inner-city with limited electrical power and interruptions of clean water supply; lack of refrigeration; ice available on the black market at high costs in money and time; limited public transportation; the burned out skeletons of cars, trucks, and military vehicles everywhere; crumbling infrastructure everywhere; debris in the streets; thick black smoke in the air coming from fires to dispose of debris; no relief from searing heat until the rains of September; 70 percent unemployment; interrupted income from police, civil service, and military jobs eliminated by OCPA decree; no telephone service; no postal service; and an unprecedented crime wave, then you can understand that it is the patience of the people Baghdad, a city of five million people, and their hope for better times that provide the primary security of U.S. troops. People offered different time lines for the endurance of this store of patience and hope but all acknowledged that the time for OCPA to demonstrate its competence was limited.

### **A World of Black and White**

OCPA is impeded in its effort to restore public services, in part, by the U.S. preference for a policy based on the theology of good and evil and its obsession with the latter. Continuing resistance in Iraq and the attacks upon occupation forces, L. Paul Bremer III, OCPA head, and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld attribute to hardcore Sunni and Ba'athist loyalists, al-Qaeda, Iranians, and thugs; always some external enemy to U.S. virtue and "success."

Students and faculty at the University of Baghdad with whom we spoke are adamant that the resistance in Falluja and other places is cultural not political. Men, who are arrested in a public and humiliating manner—face down on the ground with a display of deadly force and then having their hands tied behind their backs—have relatives who feel compelled to avenge the family or tribe dishonored by their treatment. Crackdowns, with more arrests, detentions, and injury to and death of innocent residents, increase the pool of resentment from which resistance emerges. Similarly, the shooting of a U.S. soldier at the University of Baghdad could be more cultural, dealing with the insufficiently respectful treatment of female students, than political in nature as Bremer suggested. As one dean summarized, “We are tired of waiting for respect for ourselves and our nation.”

There are many causes of the lack of basic services and the continued resistance, some of them of our own making. To externalize the causes of these problems into people we demonize not only overlooks our part in the problem it delays our getting on with more appropriate solutions.

### **Hubris**

THIS U.S. THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS IS THE CAUSE and effect of a hubris that is the third and perhaps the most serious impediment to OCPA’s work. Having sidestepped and bullied the UN in its build up to the war and having discredited its inspection program as too slow and ineffective, the U.S. now seems reluctant to admit its need for the UN in its reconstruction effort. Indeed, the cup-is-half-full message from Bremer and the Pentagon, for whom he works, calls for satisfaction and pride in what has been done, patience with the remaining tasks, and understanding of the complexities of the work before OCPA. These, of course, are the sorts of attitudes that the U.S. would not tolerate as it picked its fight with Iraq.

OCPA continues to use a dual standard in its work. The University of Baghdad presents one small case of this impediment. Because of one of Bremer’s most serious errors, blanket de-Ba’athification. Sami Al-Mudaffar, the newly elected president of the University of Baghdad, faces the problem of dealing with Iraq’s premier University’s future without some of the administrators who ran things in the past.

Students, faculty, and other administrators distinguish “Saddamis’ from other Ba’athists. Saddamis believed in the party in their souls. They informed on students and faculty, put pressure on them to join the party, and withheld travel money, promotions, salary increases, and even teaching assignments unless they did. Some, it is claimed, even had students picked up, detained, tortured, and in some instances killed. The nominal Ba’athist, on the other hand, joined the party in outward appearances only so as not to impede their careers. They often covered for other colleagues’ dissent by lying about matters such as undergoing military training with their students as prescribed. Even these distinctions are not hard and fast but represent the foci of the elliptical orbits of evasion and repression within which faculty and students moved.

They are very interested to see that those officials guilty of serious crimes against others receive lawful punishment. They are just as interested to see those outstanding teachers with only nominal Ba’athist credentials be retained to contribute to the teaching and scholarship of the University. Judging individuals by the characteristics of a group is a gross violation of human rights insists one de-Ba’athified faculty member.

The hubris of de-Ba’athification stands out if applied to Bremer; hubris always employs a double-standard. How could the managing partner of Kissinger Associates be sufficiently “de-Kissingerized” to escape the taint of *realpolitik* without a hint of human values including the support of state terror in Chile and Indonesia? In a particularly relevant policy, Kissinger supported the Iranian Shah’s wish of support of the Kurds in their fight against Iraq in the 1970s as part of the grand strategy of the Cold War—Iran with the U.S., Saddam with the Soviets. The policy of the-enemy-of-my-enemy-is-my-friend ended when the Shah decided that he would be friends with Iraq. Kissinger stopped aid to the Kurds and exposed them to retaliation by Iraq. In a statement that helps explain why some regard the Nobel Peace prize winner as an international war criminal, he explained famously that “Covert action should not be confused with missionary work.” Similarly, Bremer’s record of anti-terror study with the Heritage Foundation and focus on Iran suggests that “anti-terrorism should not be confused with national reconstruction.”

The stakes are tremendous. Iraq, a nation of 24 million people, in 1980 was on the threshold of first world development. After three wars and 12 years of sanctions, Baghdad now longs for the standards of a third world country.

U.S. occupation has brought the lowest standard of living that Iraqis have known. There is fear that the U.S. will, intentionally or not, diminish Iraq further to the level of Afghanistan.

It is not enough for the U.S. Left to observe all this in hopes of a Bush failure. First of all, the humanitarian crisis that we largely avoided in the war could follow from water borne diseases, food shortages, and violence. Secondly, Iraqis will not permit the U.S. to fail its incidental liberation of Iraq and play out some Kissingeresque geopolitical strategy with its citizens, nation, and institutions. Full-scale armed resistance to occupation without liberation will occur and the U.S. will face suppressing the resistance and maintaining an occupation of Iraq similar to the Israeli policies in its occupied territories. This will benefit no one and undermine the security of Israel and the U.S. The U.S. is unlikely to choose to abandon its intentions of achieving Israel security through control of Iraqi oil revenues, no matter how ill-conceived the means or ill-gotten the goods. As Jefferson said of slavery, we have a wolf by the ears. We may not want to hold it but we know there is danger in letting it go.

An Iraqi policy for the Left would include dealing directly with the impediments to success. Such a policy would:

- Insist on immediate visible signs of good intentions and competence which means
  - immediate tangible signs of progress on the resumption of electrical service throughout the country but especially urban areas;
    - accountability of the large U.S. contractors with responsibility for reconstruction and demand immediate efforts with visible results and assurance that profits and favoritism are not holding up immediate action in this emergency situation; and
  - re-establish the Iraqi military and police as quickly as possible and give them the tasks for security.
  
- Bring new focus on Israeli security and
  - distinguish between Zionism and Israeli security and explain that the first is antithetical to the second;

- acknowledge and end forty years of supporting the Israeli policy of military strength greater than any two Arab nations; and
- acknowledge that the peace in the Middle East runs through Baghdad but has a different starting point than the one we have taken.
  - U.S. policies in Iraq should model new policies toward the Arab world rather than replicate Israeli/Palestinian relationships. This requires
    - a repudiation of past policies that used corruption, civil war, war between states, and coups to weak Arab states hostile to Israel and to maintain control of the region's oil.
- Establish democratic processes of governance and due process of punishment by
  - Turning over to the UN the task of establishing a national government in a truly democratic process that goes beyond giving Iraqis choices among U.S. preferences or manipulation of a new government to achieve the covert purposes of the U.S. invasion of Iraq;
    - This may mean establishing a government that may provide for Israel's security in a manner different from U.S. and Israel's preferences—nuclear disarmament, inspections for weapons of mass destruction, etc.
  - preclude from government and public office only those former officials duly tried and found guilty of crimes against Iraqi law or humanity.
- End the sequential obsession with surrogates for elusive terrorists by
  - disconnecting Iraq from the war on terror and force our national leaders to admit that they manipulated the nation into fear for its security as a means to pursue other unstated policies;
  - ending the obsession with a purge of Ba'athist and other symbols of Saddam; and
  - describing U.S. efforts as war reparations;
    - acknowledge the U.S. part in bringing the Ba'athist to power, maintaining Saddam Hussein even through

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the bloody political purges of the 1960s, and supplying him with biological and chemical weapons material and

- acknowledging the role that the U.S. insistence on the most stringent UN sanctions against Iraq played in reducing the infrastructure.

We need to make the U.S. incidental liberation of Iraq into a deliberate, intentional, and successful international effort and we do not have much time to show our intentions and competence. Baghdad will probably sizzle the entire summer. We can hope, however, that serious discussion and some immediate action can support the hope of Iraqis for improvements to come and cool things off long enough to permit an intentional, effective, international, and genuine liberation of Iraq to begin. While we are doing this, of course, we must also pursue regime change in the U.S.

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