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Wither Independence?
Iraq in Perspective: From Despotism to Occupation

by
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I

There has been nearly unanimous consensus among Iraqis that a new age of possible progress and prosperity has dawned upon their battered and war-fatigued country with the downfall of Saddam Hussein on April 9th. However, much had tainted this rosy image, and much more could still mar the outcome. A principal factor has been the highly incompetent and nonchalant manner in which the U.S.-U.K. occupying forces have conducted themselves: one wonders if this is a result of sheer imperial arrogance, or ignorance of the region, or a combination of both. None of the above reasons is excusable in any way, of course. When a disproportionate U.S. force decimated Saddam Hussein's two infamous sons, Uday and Qusay, and their few companions and then showed their battered images to the world, two messages may be read therefrom. First, the U.S. will absolutely contravene every mode of rational, moral, ethical and reasonable behavior to make their point and achieve success (in their own assessment). Why did they not arrest these two criminals and have them justly tried in Iraqi courts? Second, U.S. policy planners have an inveterate attachment to change through force. The lessons from the 20th century are aplenty (as the Hiroshima anniversary, amongst others, adequately reminds us), and the difference now is of volume and rate rather than quality.

Those of us who vehemently opposed the launch of an immoral, unjust and illegal war have to seriously address now the occupation: not in a romantic, knee-jerk oppositional fashion—which has become commonplace among western as well as Arab oppositionists to U.S. imperialist plans—but in a calculated manner that puts the interests of the Iraqi people uncompromisingly at the forefront. Thus, what are the facts on the ground, and what may be done? In what follows, I am more interested in raising questions than providing simple, speculative answers. What deeply angers and pains me are the cold as well as condescending views offered by Arabs or

Americans, alike, when it comes to dealing with Iraq. To these two groups, governments and populace, Iraq seems to be a possession, and each has an opinion on what to do with it. Very little attention is given to the how to achieve results, which leads me, and a few others, to believe that none is really interested in the well-being of Iraqis.

II

The U.S. has waged the war against Iraq in spite of unprecedented worldwide public pressure against it. The pretexts for the war, Saddam Hussein's possession of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) and his alleged link to al-Qaeda, have been in dispute from the very beginning. Four months after the war and neither a trace of WMD exists, nor a hint of a link to al-Qaeda terrorists, rather an unraveling of a series of apocryphal stories penned by elected and unelected officials in the U.S. and U.K. governments with the sole purpose of manipulating public opinion prior to waging war. Now the sad fact is that such despicable tactics—and the list could be long—have placed the fallen despot, Saddam Hussein, and his regime in a rather romantic-heroic position among many a person within the Arab world, the third world and elsewhere. Rather than containing terrorist groups and cutting their lifelines, U.S. actions have given life to a litany of fragmented, but ruthless, reactionary groups intent on inflicting damage on all symbols of modernity—and certainly not limited to the U.S. and its interests.

To this day, many cannot fathom the horrific and criminal nature of the deposed Iraqi regime; and U.S. tactics in Iraq have allowed people to compare to and contrast with a fictitious version of Saddam Hussein's reign.

Every visitor to Iraq speaks of war-torn cities, devastation, dilapidated services and war- and sanctions-fatigued populace, on the one hand, and the existence of monstrous, grand palaces and edifices, on the other: All being the direct outcome of 30+ years of authoritarian rule and 12 years of the most suffocating (U.S.-U.K. instigated and propelled) economic sanctions ever imposed. But Iraqis returning for the first time after decades of exile have observed one thing of significant importance in the midst of the rubble: *people feel free and hopeful*. There is a satisfying, inner happiness one feels when free that can only be understood if one's freedom has been curtailed: no explanation, lengthy or terse, would do justice. This is what precisely gives

one hope for a better tomorrow. Alas, both are slowly being nibbled at, and the prospects are unclear.

Four months after the fall of Saddam Hussein's hierarchical structure of governance, basic municipal and civic services are at an appallingly low level. The work force has no work and only portion of it has started receiving salaries, some of which were given in useless currency that further aggravated an already drained populace.¹ Security is deteriorating mainly in Baghdad and environs, while most other cities function much better. Further, the rumor mill is grinding absolutely anything imaginable, which only contributes to increasing the level of uncertainty in the country. The Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) promulgated actions that could only worsen a very unsettled situation, namely: dissolving the Army and affiliated organizations, as well as the Ministry of Information, thus rendering more than 250,000 without recourse to any source of livelihood. Furthermore, the so-called process of de-Baathification is purely ideological in nature—principally fueled by the hawks in the U.S. Administration and their Iraqi underlings, most notably Ahmed Chalabi, Kanan Makiya and Co.

In a country where membership to the Baath party became the only means for advancement for many, this tactic is bound to engulf the country in a process of vilification and counter-vilification based on personal, rather than objective, accounts. What would be more appropriate and just recourse is to judiciously investigate the role of senior Baath functionaries: trying before the law all those guilty of crimes against the people, and pardoning those whose hands were untainted. A national healing and reconciliation process is essential if the tragedies and horrors of the past 30 years are to be constructively addressed, and avoid institutionalizing recrimination and guilt by association. The latter is likely to take the country down a dangerous spiral, which accentuates antiquated tribal rule—that Saddam Hussein himself tried to resuscitate in the latter part of the nineties to further buttress his reign. Iraq's political parties must resist this and instead press for just trials and a process of reconciliation. Interestingly, the majority of Iraqis seems to favor this approach as evinced by personal and televised accounts (albeit not polled scientifically), thus presenting yet another hopeful scenario for Iraq and its people *if* left alone.

Events indicate that the U.S. invading-cum-occupying forces, while possessing formidable fire power, have seemingly less than formidable

planning and analytical powers. Most echelons of the decision-making process within the U.S. government had apparently been surprised by the run of events. More surprisingly, no contingency plans had been prepared for the (speedy) fall of Saddam Hussein's government and the ensuing dissolution of ministries, state organizations, the police, etc. What would a rational person expect would happen if a highly centralized structure of governance dependent on a ruthless social policy grounded in chauvinistic and sectarian politics suddenly collapsed? Why, then, have U.S. planners and their research centers and institutes been unable to anticipate at least a general framework for dealing with events?

The sanctions-fatigued, repressed Iraqis with hardly adequate access to basic food requirements, never mind super-doooper search engines, computing power, etc., could—and would—have done much better than the functionaries of the CPA. It is also worthy of note that this just-do-and-wait-to-see-what-happens is essentially the same obscurantism governing doctrinaire religious teachings (of whatever color): a complete and utter absence of critical thought. This behavior fundamentally stems from what the U.S. feels itself to be: the unparalleled imperial power of our age. Thus, ideology is fundamentally and intrinsically at the core of all that is happening, and the media have performed a compelling job of *d*isinforming the U.S. populace and effectively contributing to a brainwashing campaign at an astounding rate. A pressing question presents itself: Will the U.S. populace seek to change this through ballot boxes in 2004? Will they come to really understand that they would not be hated in the world if they actually thought of the rest of the world on an equal footing and genuinely divorced themselves from condescending attitudes that are so prevalent in almost every segment of class, profession, ethnic and religious background?

III

IRAQ IS BEING CONSTANTLY PORTRAYED AS A FRAGILE formation of ethno-religious groups, essentially violent and vying for power. Is there a country on this planet that is not an amalgamation of ethno-religious groups? Even Israel as a Jewish State comprises various ethnicities, and hence is heterogeneous.

Modern Iraq has been a staunchly secular country where the separation of religion from the state has been a fact of life—respected and adopted by all,

and certainly by its Shiite and Sunni religious establishments. While not a phenomenon at the popular level, ethno-sectarian chauvinism has been institutionalized by the state since its inception: the progeny of the British concocted Cox-al-Naqeeb plan laying down the foundation for the pyramidal power structure in the nascent government of Iraq in 1921. To ensure reliance on foreign forces, state power was entrusted to a minority elite, with a clear segregation of the largesse among the vying groups: Officers of the erstwhile Ottoman Army, Sunni landowners and religious notables, and a handful of Shiite landowners and religious notables and Jewish and Christian businessmen.² The association was entrenched in the belonging to a group, ethnic, religious or sectarian, rather than to the country Iraq. It may be moot to question whether that was not a reflection of the lack of a national identity; however, history indicates that the inhabitants of Iraq had strongly identified themselves with the land of Mesopotamia, and their association has since been with it rather than strictly speaking the tribe, or religion or sect.

1958, marking the overthrow of the monarchy and the establishment of the first republic, ushered in a new period where Iraqis identified themselves as citizens and not according to tribal, religious or sectarian divides. The modern political formations, Communist or Pan-Arab—principally the Baath party, have been clearly secular and encompassed all sectors of society along ideological rather than ethno-sectarian divisions. The Baath party slowly degenerated since Saddam Hussein became the “strong man” in the early seventies, and in the summer of 1979 he consummated his power by annihilating the leftist wing within the party (led by Abdel Khaleq al-Samarai, who was summarily purged with more than 50 of his comrades, most of whom were executed by Saddam and his underlings). During the 1980s Saddam Hussein embarked on entrenching a family-based rule, and the remnants of the party had become a façade to one of the darkest periods of Iraq’s history. In the 1990s, with the help of the sanctions, the government had further degenerated into a brutal mafia-style repression against any modicum of opposition. The inhabitants of the south, mostly Shias, paid a particularly heavy price as a result of their uprising following the 1991 Gulf War. Prior to 1991 the government had forcibly transferred Arabs from the south to the Kurdish north, especially oil-rich Kirkuk, with the objective of creating a new demographic reality. Moreover, a diligent student of the British colonizers, Saddam Hussein fervently adopted an approach favoring one or other Sunni clan for wealth and governmental positions, and continually pitted one tribe against the other. This *ipso facto* created a

situation whereby those minority tribes had come to associate their comfortable status with the regime's existence.

The inhabitants of the south, on the other hand, have long been suppressed not because of their Shia faith *per se*, but because that region had always been a source of resistance against central authority. The south of Iraq, one of the richest cultural hot spots anywhere, has long been characteristically secular and had been the birthplace of Iraqi communism as well as the Arab socialist movement—including the Baath party. Hence, the brutal repression and suppression inflicted on the inhabitants of the south by Saddam Hussein's regime simply began as a measure against a people demanding freedom, then metamorphosed into a sectarian identity following the disappearance of all secular opposition within Iraq. Saddam Hussein's well-practiced technique of punishment had been collective and decisively long term: cut off the livelihood of any group of people who dares pose a threat to his rule. Thus, the Marsh Arabs, descendants of Mesopotamia's first dwellers, have been dealt a most severe blow to their very livelihood and existence for demanding "bread and freedom": the marshes were drained, and fertile agricultural land was turned arid because the Tigris had purposefully been redirected away from it.

It is worthwhile pointing out that while the south had been brutally suppressed, not-an-insignificant number of the security apparatus torturers did actually come from the south too—with the top security echelons coming from the family mafia and affiliated subordinates. Such is the nexus of victim and torturer under Saddam Hussein's reign of terror: entwined to the nth degree.

IV

Why, then, do Arab satellite TV stations and most Arab journals maliciously propagate an image of every event in Iraq taking place along sectarian lines? Al-Jazeera, in spite of clarifications and corrections from Iraqis inside Iraq, insists on calling the pockets of local fighting as "national resistance led by the Sunnis." In many a program where audience from Baghdad, Cairo and Beirut talk about the situation in Iraq, you here one rhetorical statement after another from Cairo and Beirut devoid of genuine sympathy for the plight of the Iraqis and any concrete plan of how the Arabs

wish to assist the Iraqis: Thus the strong backlash within a significant portion of Iraqis, educated or otherwise all across the country, against the manner in which Arab governments, press, intellectuals and even populace had sought to represent the situation in Iraq under Saddam Hussein's rule and now. Iraqis feel disgusted by the hypocrisy practiced by many an Arab: prior to 9 April, 2003 Iraq's children were a mere slogan for Arabs as the murderous sanctions torn them asunder, and as years of political repression sought, but failed, to create a docile populace. Most Iraqis contend that no progress could emerge in the Arab world if internal repression persists, and no justification should be given to any form of authoritarian rule, as the history of modern Iraq has amply shown: a rich nation, and highly-educated people literally reduced to selling their belongings to rummage for food for their offspring.³

Iraq may now present a scenario for the Arabs to follow. No one in Iraq is oblivious to U.S. reasons for waging war on Iraq, but they recognized their inability to stand against the U.S. mammoth—since neither Europe nor any other state dared oppose the U.S.. The split between the dormant left inside of Iraq and their comrades outside specifically addresses this point. They both agreed that no positive change could take place in Iraq while Saddam Hussein's regime was in power, but they differed on the mechanisms for change. Those who lived inside Iraq and were experiencing repression on a daily basis felt that only an outside power could remove the despotic regime. Then, and only then, could work begin to rebuild the country. Hardly any Iraqi welcomed the invading forces, and they all agree that the occupying forces must leave. The collapse of the central government and all its offshoots created a significant power vacuum as well as a security black hole. At the current stage, foreign presence is required to maintain peace and order. The question is how and who should do it? No army in the world is trained to maintain peace and order among civilians, thus the tragic chaotic scenarios over the past four months. All visitors to Iraq acknowledge that the young American GIs are scared witless, and therefore shoot at everything that moves. This takes us back to questions I posed at the beginning of this article: Are the U.S. planners incompetent, nonchalant or both?

What is clear is that a strict timeline for a speedy withdrawal of U.S. and British forces must be put in place, and at the same time a staunch commitment must be made by the UN for international forces to replace them at once. There should be no lapse between the two as the political volatility in Iraq now is serious. Moreover, the Governing Council appointed

by Paul Bremer III, while not the transitory national government that was demanded by the Iraqis, is required to form a united front and work to immediately achieve two goals: restoring peace and security within the country, and restoring the functioning of municipal and governmental activities. Their efficacy will be judged if they achieve these two goals and how quickly. Once this is accomplished, an unequivocal demand for the institution of democratic elections to form a new government must be put in place through a realistic, but non-pliant timeline. Achieving success would require a unified approach by the Council in order to pressure the CPA into accepting Iraqi demands.

The support that the world could give Iraqis is by placing pressure on their respective governments to demand that Iraqis receive the reigns of power, peacefully, systemically and quickly. The world has a chance to show that it cannot let the U.S. greyhound loose: it must be tamed.

Notes

¹ The 10,000 Dinar note is rumoured to be counterfeit and is thus being accepted at a much lower rate, if at all. Furthermore, prices continue to soar.

² The religious establishment, as elsewhere, was split between submissive and oppositional.

³ The Arab League in the meeting held in early August by its foreign ministers refused to recognize the Governing Council recently formed in Iraq, and rationalized the decision on the basis that recognition would be tantamount to accepting occupation. According to the charter of the League, UN Security Council resolutions must be accepted and adhered to as well as international treaties. The UN passed Security Council resolution 1483, under U.S. pressure, that basically legitimized the occupation of Iraq and placed the country under the administrative control of the occupying forces. U.S. forces occupy parts of almost every Arab state, kingdom or sheikhdom with the exception of a few, and hence the Arab foreign ministers' talk of not willing to recognize occupation by the U.S. is nothing but hogwash.

Moreover, they are in contravention of the very UNSC resolutions that they proclaim to enforce. The real motive for their action lies elsewhere. A genuine change towards democracy in Iraq would threaten all of these illegitimate governments, and thus they have been united in actively opposing any reasonable resolution to the Iraq crisis. They have not even proposed any alternative to U.S. occupation, nor outlined a “road map” for ending occupation. Moreover, Arab official media continue to portray any escalation in Iraq on religious, sectarian and ethnic bases, and hardly any voice is given to the secular voices that are widely available inside the country. It is worthy of note that the clashes and confrontations with U.S. forces in regions surrounding Baghdad, notably Faluja, have been partly fuelled by religious fundamentalists, shipped to Iraq before and after the invasion of Iraq, bent on destabilizing the country. These deadly confrontations are not supported by most Iraqis and do not represent a form of armed struggle: they are futile violence whose goal is disruption of ordinary life and serves no useful goal: only innocent civilians die as a consequence.