

Prospects for Peace in Iraq

Mike Phipps examines the difficulties of securing a lasting just peace in Iraq.

The prospects for peace in Iraq depend on how one defines this tricky concept. Tacitus long ago noted how occupying armies equate desolation with peace. A military operation as devastating as that launched by the US and its allies on Iraq may have some success in imposing the short-term peace of the graveyard, but a lasting, just peace remains elusive. This is because of the catastrophic nature of that invasion, not for western reputations, but for the Iraqi people themselves. One in two households in Baghdad alone have lost a family member. A million have died. A further million have been left disabled. The war has created five million refugees. Anthony Arnove estimates in *The Logic for Withdrawal* that close to sixteen percent of the Iraqi population has been uprooted. He adds: 'Basic foods and necessities are now increasingly beyond the reach of ordinary Iraqis, thanks to soaring inflation unleashed by the occupation's destruction of the already shaky Iraqi economy, cuts to state subsidies encouraged by the International Monetary Fund and the Coalition Provisional Authority, and the disruption of the oil industry. Unemployment is regularly estimated at somewhere between 50-70%.'

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To that can be added a culture of embezzlement that can be traced to the deliberate overpricing of contracts by multinational corporations in the first days of the Occupation. Today Iraq is an increasingly authoritarian state, which has institutionalised corruption in every aspect of public life. *The Independent* reported in June: 'Iraq is the world's premier kleptomaniac state. According to Transparency International, the only countries deemed more crooked than Iraq are Somalia and Burma, while Haiti and Afghanistan rank just behind.'

Brutality and torture are rife in its jails. New laws have been passed to crack down on the independent media. A violent crime wave of kidnappings for ransom, allegedly involving some members of Iraq's security services, is sweeping the country. Six years after the US invaded Iraq, 36 percent of Baghdad's drinking water is unsafe, according to the Iraqi Environment Ministry – in a good month. In a bad month, it's 90 percent.

Seventy percent of doctors are estimated to have

fled the country. Homelessness is widespread. Five years after the bombardment, people returning to Falluja find only destruction. Water shortages are destroying agriculture, power shortages crippling industry. Permanent damage has been inflicted on the country's historic cultural heritage. An Amnesty International report last year described the human rights situation as 'disastrous' with 'a climate of impunity [and] the economy in tatters.'

On every level, Iraq has been traumatised. As Naomi Klein notes in *The Shock Doctrine*, the opening US military bombardment provided the social and psychological disorientation to embark on a crippling economic policy. As the country burned, the invaders launched a programme of mass privatisation, free trade and flat taxes. Iraqi companies were sidelined in the reconstruction process, for purely ideological reasons, despite being able to do the work at one-tenth of the price of western contractors, whose results, lacking any meaningful oversight, were predictably poor. And the money wasted by mainly US corporations, it should be remembered, was Iraq's own. To ensure these policies took hold, local elections were overturned in favour of Occupation-appointed puppets. Opponents of these 'freedoms' were repressed as Saddamists or Al-Qaeda. Over 60,000 were jailed by US forces in the first three and a half years of Occupation and many were tortured.

Opposition to these practices was met with fierce repression. Three-quarters of the city of Falluja was flattened, with up to 6,000 people killed. Some 36,000 of the city's 50,000 homes were destroyed, along with 60 schools and 65 mosques and shrines. Up to 200,000 residents were forced to flee. The US admits that it used white phosphorus as a battlefield weapon in the assault on Fallujah. An Italian TV documentary showed images of bodies, which it said proved the incendiary, similar in effect to napalm, had been used against men, women and children who were burned to the bone. US journalist Dahr Jamail confirmed the dropping of incendiary bombs the size of tanks, which caused large fires. 'When anyone touched those fires,' he wrote, 'their body burned for hours.'

He also quotes eye witness reports, some from accredited journalists, of US soldiers entering houses and shooting people for not obeying orders in English, a language that local people did not understand. There were also reports of US soldiers shooting civilians who were waving white flags while they tried to escape the city, in some cases by attempting to swim the Euphrates, women and children included. Other witnesses saw American

tanks rolling over the bodies of the wounded lying in the streets. Call the desolation of Falluja ‘peace’, if you wish – in reality it was a war crime.

The longer the Occupation of Iraq has continued, the more its perpetrators have tried to reinvent their role as that of arbitrator between religious factions. Much is made in the media of Shia-Sunni divisions in Iraq, divisions which the Occupation consciously strengthened from the outset. In their book, *Iraq in Fragments*, Eric Herring and Glen Rangwala explain how the central state was carved up between religious parties and groups which used their privileged position to sell public sector jobs to whoever could pay. US-organised elections strengthened the sectarianism, with party lists based on Sunni or Shia affiliation. Victory meant jobs, favours and kickbacks for the group in power.

This civil conflict is perpetuated by the Occupation. As long as each side of the sectarian divide, itself largely created and bolstered by the Occupation, feels that it can outbid the other in the competition for US resources and empowerment, then it has a vested interest in the perpetuation of the conflict. The removal of the Occupation destroys that rationale. In the absence of the possibility of one side or the other securing the US materiel necessary to outflank the other, each side would be motivated to seek an accommodation with the other.

Even so, we should be a cautious about the ‘sectarian strife’ narrative. The biggest threat to peace in Iraq today are the arms in the hands of the US and other occupation forces and the tens of thousands of mercenaries contracted by the Pentagon. These private security contractors, incidentally, are completely outside Iraqi jurisdiction and some, like Blackwater, have been involved in high-profile attacks on civilians.

The Times reported in August that guards employed by Blackwater shot Iraqis in unprovoked and random attacks. Sworn statements from former company employees claimed that Erik Prince, Blackwater’s founder, ‘views himself as a Christian crusader tasked with eliminating Muslims and the Islamic faith from the globe’. The company was also alleged to have used child prostitutes at its compound in Baghdad’s fortified Green Zone again with Erik Prince’s full knowledge.

In the same month, the Obama administration extended a contract with Blackwater for more than \$20 million for ‘security services’ in Iraq. Since Obama took office in January the State Department has contracted with Blackwater for more than \$174 million in ‘security services’ alone in Iraq and Afghanistan and tens of millions more in ‘aviation services’.

Many hope peace can emerge from Iraq’s vibrant civil society. Even this, however, has been debased. Chosen organisations are funded by the US State



Muntazer al-Zaidi throws his shoe at President Bush

Department, groups that former US Secretary of State Colin Powell described as ‘an important part of our combat team’. Haifa Zangana’s book *City of Widows* highlights these issues in relation to NGOs working with women. She argues that these hastily created organisations have impeded the work of genuine grassroots groups. Female illiteracy is at its highest since the 1930s, privatisation is destroying free public services, and unemployment ‘has fuelled prostitution, back-street abortions, “honour killings” and domestic violence.’

The latest phase of Iraq’s misery began in 2007. The ‘surge’ – the increased deployment of US troops in 2007 credited with stabilising Iraq – led to nearly a million more refugees fleeing the country for Syria in that year alone.

An invasion based on deceit about non-existent weapons of mass destruction, an occupation which may have more to do with energy security in a world of diminishing resources, or the search for regional hegemony by the world’s leading superpower – such an invasion based on the most illiberal of motives cannot be transformed seamlessly into a humanitarian mission of reconstruction driven by the worthiest ideals. The forces occupying Iraq cannot rescue that country from the chaos and destruction that they have helped to create.

And this is true too for the politicians they have put in place. Zaid al-Ali, a British Iraqi lawyer who worked with the UN and interacted closely with most of the leading politicians in Iraq, wrote recently: ‘It is worth considering what type of person would accept to collaborate with the occupation forces in Iraq. If Iraq has become the most corrupt country in the Middle East, it is because the senior government officials are actually amongst the most corrupt people in the country. If violence is increasing, it is because the government is involved in promoting it. But there are many Iraqis who are competent, honest, and non-sectarian and who would be willing to rebuild their country, so long as the circumstances are correct. What this means in practice is that the US army must leave in order to create enough space for these people

to contribute.’

Barack Obama promised on the campaign trail to withdraw US forces. The way towards this was paved by the State of Forces Agreement, signed in the last months of the Bush Administration, which committed the US to just a small residual force. Or did it? Seumas Milne observed in *The Guardian*: ‘Briefings by Pentagon officials have also made clear this residual force could remain long after 2011. It turns out that the new security agreement can be ditched by either side, while the Iraqi government is fully entitled to invite US troops to remain, as explained in the accompanying “strategic” framework agreement, so long as its bases or presence are not defined as “permanent”.’

In June 2009, *Foreign Policy in Focus* underlined this discrepancy between appearance and reality: ‘The United States is looking to withdraw from Iraq in name only, as it appears that up to 50,000 military personnel will remain after the deadline... The larger loophole in the agreement is the treatment of military contractors. There has been little mention of the 132,610 military contractors in Iraq. Since September 2008, only 30,000 troops have left Iraq. The 134,000 soldiers that remain are just slightly below the number of troops that were in Iraq in 2003. These numbers are likely to remain well above 100,000 until 2010.’

A month later, the BBC reported: ‘Nearly a month after American troops officially withdrew from urban areas in Iraq, they are quietly going back in again, patrolling the streets of towns and cities where, despite improvements in security, violence remains an everyday occurrence.’ And in September it was reported that Obama had approved a Pentagon request to send an additional 1,000 troops to Iraq – just a week after the Pentagon added thousands of extra contractors to Iraq, ostensibly to replace US troops during the drawdown.

Iraqis, meanwhile, have had enough. The contempt in which the continuing occupation is still held is underlined by the lionising of the Iraqi who threw his shoe at President Bush. Muntazer al-Zaidi, viciously tortured in jail, was hailed as a hero on his release in September to offers of a new house, car and

much more.

Less reported, however, was the shooting dead by US soldiers the same week of a man who threw his slippers at a military convoy in Falluja. ‘When I saw Americans patrolling the streets of Falluja I lost my temper,’ he told reporters before he died. ‘Troops have withdrawn from cities, so why they still patrolling here in Falluja?’

Why indeed? His pointless, tragic death underlines the obstinate truth that no lasting peace in



Iraqis enjoy a statue of al-Zaidi’s shoe in Tikrit.

Iraq is possible without a complete end to the Occupation. But this is just a first step. Last year, a conference of over 100 activists, many of them Iraqis, adopted a statement calling for Justice for Iraq, which is now being used as a campaigning tool to solicit the widest possible support for a principled withdrawal from that country. It states very simply:

• ‘We call on those states responsible for the invasion and occupation of Iraq to terminate their illegal and immoral war, and express our solidarity with the Iraqi people in their struggle for peace, justice and self-determination. In particular, we demand:

- An immediate end to the US and UK-led occupation of Iraq;
- Urgent action to fully address the current humanitarian crises facing Iraq’s people, including help for the more than three million refugees and displaced persons;
- An end to all foreign interference in Iraq’s affairs, including its oil industry, so that Iraqis can exercise their right to self-determination;
- Compensation and reparations from those countries responsible for war and sanctions on Iraq;
- Prosecution of all those responsible for war crimes, human rights abuses, and the theft of Iraq’s resources.

We demand justice for Iraq.’

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