



Sorting Out The Tragic Iraq Situation

by Bill Janzen, December 3, 2003

The following article by Bill Janzen covers the same material as his talk to the Group of 78 luncheon on November 27, 2003 entitled "Perspectives on the Iraq Crisis", though he explains it is not organized in quite the same way.

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There are at least three vantage points for looking at the tragic Iraq situation. First is that of the people there. In my visit last September I was struck by both their hopes and their fears. They were grateful that the very oppressive Saddam Hussein government had ended. They hoped that now there would be more freedom and, also, that there would be no more wars. Journalists hoped that they could nurture a climate to openly debate public issues. Representatives from different ethnic and religious groups hoped that they would find a way of living together in mutual respect. Church leaders (4% of Iraq's 25 million people are Christian) looked forward to interacting more freely with foreign visitors. All hoped that schools and hospitals would soon run well and that they would be able to earn a living.

Alongside these and other hopes, the people had real fears and worries. They feared the kidnappings, thefts, and other acts of violence that hindered many aspects of daily life, be it sending children to school or running a business. They talked about shortages in water and electricity and about the high unemployment and a new poverty. They criticized the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), which is the government, for not doing nearly enough on these problems, for not making more use of the many well-trained Iraqis, and for not being more respectful. They worried about how US economic and military interests would affect Iraq. And they were anxious about the resistance groups and whether more and more people would side with them, out of anger at the CPA or to advance the interests of their particular group, and whether things might degenerate into a civil war? Many initial hopes were giving way to fears and worries.

A second vantage point, which helps to explain the increased anxiety, relates to the American approach. It is not the only reason for the problems but its high view of military power and its low view of other methods for dealing with problems, is a major factor. This view, which has marked the post 9/11 “war on terrorism”, is evident in that its Iraq policy was placed almost entirely in the hands of its Defence Department. The State Department, for its part, called in several hundred Iraqis living in the US and produced 13 volumes of detailed reports on how different needs in Iraq could be addressed but the Defence Department, seemingly blind to many of those needs, refused to look at these reports or to use the people who wrote them, all the while doing little planning of its own for the post war situation.

One serious consequence relates to the widespread looting that started as soon as the Saddam Hussein government fell. The US Defence Department, not having expected it, did almost nothing to stop it. Enormous damage resulted not only to the country's physical and administrative infrastructure but also to the people's confidence in the Americans. Similarly, a few weeks later, US administrators dismissed all 400,000 people in the Iraqi military and some 50,000 senior civil servants who had been members of the Ba'th party, thereby causing humiliation and economic hardship while also limiting the CPA's administrative capacity. Later, one US official said, “That was the week we made 450,000 enemies on the ground in Iraq.” Generally, the US had not prepared itself for running the country.

Despite this approach, good things are happening, thanks both to Iraqi diligence and US contributions: many schools are running; a new police force is being trained; repairs are being made to infrastructure relating to water, sewage, electricity, oil, irrigation, shipping ports, and communications; and new local government councils have started. But many problems continue and many people are worse off than they were before the war. Anger at the US has increased. As a result US officials tend to stay inside their barricaded buildings while their soldiers resort to harsher methods against local people, thereby making a difficult situation worse. A third vantage point relates to dynamics in the Arab world. In the generations when Arab people longed for independence, first from Ottoman rule and, after World War I, from European rule, they saw the US as their friend. Many of the schools and colleges started by western missionaries were hotbeds for the independence movements. Unfortunately, after World War II, when the countries became independent, the West's desire to prevent Soviet expansionism, ensure access to oil, and protect the state of Israel, led it to pressure new Arab governments to comply with these concerns even at the expense of their own people. The Soviet Union was active in the pursuit of its interests too.

At the same time, and partly as a reaction, there were broad movements that sought to establish an Arab authenticity. In the 1950's and 60's the semi-secular pan-Arab movement, championed by Egypt's Gamal Abdul Nasser, inspired grand visions of Arab unity, strength, and social justice, but its record was mixed and in the 1967 war with Israel it suffered a major defeat. In its wake movements of political Islam gained ground. They critiqued Arab governments for their corruption and their subservience to the big powers, and some rendered valuable social services, but they have also disappointed

many. More recently, some Arab intellectuals have begun to call for a more self-critical stance, for a separation of the mosque from the state, for using money on education rather than on weapons, for greater openness to outsiders, and for basic rights and freedoms. Some of these people identified with the words of President Bush about establishing democracy in Iraq and encouraging it also in other Arab countries.

Such a democratic outcome is highly unlikely. Not all the reasons relate to the approach of the US but it relied too much on massive military power and did too little on a range of other needs. It's interest in oil and strategic military bases and its strong support for Israel, with little regard for the Palestinians, have long been major issues for most Arab people. It went into this war on very questionable grounds. And some neighbouring countries have their own reasons for supporting resistance groups in Iraq and trying to get the US tied down there. Also, the US used weapons coated with depleted uranium that will cause cancer, birth defects, and other health problems for generations to come.

The plans call for a new Iraqi government by mid-2004. If that government materializes, it will probably have an Islamic orientation, with uncertain implications for Iraq's non-Muslim groups. It will certainly face many complex pressures, because the reconstruction task is so huge, because the claims from different segments of Iraqi society may be hard to reconcile, because neighbouring countries may have issues, and because US economic and military interests may loom so large that some groups will see a new government as a puppet regime and therefore continue the resistance. It is quite possible that fighting and violence, both in Iraq and internationally, will go on for some time.

Though the US approach must be criticized, it is important to also hear the criticism of some Iraqis about certain western NGOs who, in the 1990's, strongly opposed the UN sanctions against Iraq but said little about Saddam Hussein's terrible violations of their basic rights. This points to a serious challenge for people committed to peace and justice: to oppose war but also to develop stronger means for ensuring that governments are genuinely committed to the well-being of their people.

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