

# Struggling for Progress, in Iraq!

THE CURRENT ARMED INSURGENCY in Iraq, erroneously portrayed by some as "resistance" to U.S. occupation, does not – nor could it ever – represent a national resistance movement. While it is true that the medley of insurgents espouses "a mixture of Islamic and Pan-Arab ideas," it is inaccurate to insinuate that they "agree on the need to put an end to U.S. presence in Iraq." [1] For if this were true, why are those elements not fighting U.S. operational headquarters and bases in Qatar, and elsewhere in the Arab world? Their *modus operandi* embodies resistance to the demise of the *ancien régime* and what it represented, on the one hand, and the possible dawn of pluralistic democracy in Iraq, on the other. The Saddamist-cum-Islamist mercenaries have, since the very beginning, opened channels of communication with U.S. officials, and their emissaries have diligently engaged in dialogue with Arab, Chinese, French, and other European officials. It is a known secret that Iraq's neighbors have contributed to funding the insurgency and offered refuge to its leaders as well as access to the airwaves – as in the case of Qatar's al-Jazeera..

Saddam Hussein's brand of Baathists and faithful security agents – whom I refer to collectively as Saddamists – have followed a two-pronged approach shortly after April 9, 2003. First, they steered an armed insurgency in collaboration with other elements, namely fundamentalist Islamists, who have been on a personal vendetta with their erstwhile patron, the United States. Then pro-consul Paul Bremer's dissolution of the Iraqi military and noises of de-Baathification, on the one hand, and inexcusable U.S. military tactics of attacking civilians willy-nilly, on the other, fueled events and provided fodder to the insurgency. The Saddamist nexus has

been well organized, well funded, and ruthless. It has opportunistically maneuvered and founded façade religious organizations, and coordinated activities well with the criminal gangs littering Iraq[2] and the influx of foreign Wahabi jihadis intermingling with local Wahabi diehards. The second concomitant tactic has been their affiliation with Ayad Allawi's National Accord Movement, and their gaining serious positions in sensitive ministries (Interior, Defense, Foreign Affairs).

The decades-long institutionalization of ethnosectarian political and power structure and the tribalization of Iraqi society, now at its peak thanks to four decades of Saddamist despotism and U.S.- and British- sponsored economic sanctions, have been further aggravated by occupation and the occupiers' nonchalant attitude towards the locals. It is perhaps a bit of *naïveté* and sheer fear, but also a lot of arrogance, that propel U.S. soldiers to knock down house doors, throw everyone on the ground, feel up women and children lest they be concealing weapons and deliberately offending worshippers by not only attacking but defecating in their places of worship. It is the arrogance of empire and supremacy of irrationality that drive these actions, which are destined to add fuel to the blazing fire.[3] The unequivocal condemnation should be extended to the targeted killings by the insurgents of (mainly) Shi'a and Christians in towns and hamlets known for peaceful coexistence.

IT IS IN THIS LIGHT that we must understand the significance of the January elections. They represented a watershed in Iraq's history for several reasons: (1) The majority of Iraq's populace rejects ethnosectarian political and power structures, and while the Shi'a and Kurds of Iraq have been at the worst receiving end since the establishment of the State of Iraq in 1921, they seek a new beginning based on participatory, pluralistic principles. In spite of virulent

attacks and targeted killings, the Shi'a majority has acted with remarkable restraint of hardly any parallel in the region, and indeed elsewhere. Equally importantly, the Christian minority has been adamant in its push for elections within an Iraqi construct as a guarantee of peaceful coexistence and future progress. (2) While the religious parties occupy a significant position in current Iraqi politics – for reasons I deliberated upon in my Winter 2005 piece for *New Politics*, the voters indicated their conditional as well as limited support for them, and began to question the efficacy and extent to which their involvement in political life would be beneficial to the country. (3) As a result of the aforesaid, the (humongous) wall of fear that began to slowly crumble in the aftermath of the 1991 uprising is now irreversible: the Saddamists' tether to power is severed for good and their return is next to impossible. (4) The outcome of the elections can serve to end the occupation and curtail U.S. presence in the country.

The electorate, who have risked their lives to vote for genuine change and against the status quo, including U.S. occupation, will – I suspect – not acquiesce to a semblance of democracy based on confessionalism, nor will they jump over to the side of the current insurgents. The latter are, and will continue, to try to instigate civil strife; but judging by people's resilience to and rejection of tit-for-tat retaliations, the Saddamist-cum-Islamists will most likely not succeed.

Ignoring nuanced Iraqi politics and societal dynamics has shamelessly led segments of the left to cheer for a thuggish, reactionary insurgency set on a fruitless course to curtailing, and potentially halting, U.S. hegemonic policies. No crystal ball is needed to understand Iraq – or indeed the Middle East, just a rational reading of history and a commitment to the inviolable sanctity of human life. Human beings, not machine guns, build progress. The rightist view of

democracy as a commodity that can be exported using *laissez-faire* economics has infected those leftist segments in a serious way. It prompted them to ignore local (mal)development and the necessity to overhaul a highly corrupt regional power structure; and, in a naïve way, they have come to share the neocon's basic principle of ethnonationalist development.

Thus, elections in Iraq have been a mammoth achievement not because, but in spite, of U.S. desire. It was Sayyed Ali al-Sistani, the Shiite religious authority, who, over U.S. objections, was unwavering in his demand to their eventually taking place.

A BURGEONING, ALBEIT SMALL, movement, amongst university students and young graduates, is emerging in Iraq. It is skeptical of the traditional view of party politics, and emphasizes providing immediate solutions to exigent local problems – from sewage collection, freedom of speech, and critique of the educational system, to challenging patriarchal authority as represented by state and religion – through grassroots participation. They educate, build and mend bridges; they document the effects of the occupation; they peaceably challenge the government and the occupation. They are endeavoring to constitute a *citizenry*, and challenge (ethnoreligious) nationalism. They perform no miracles, but their effectiveness has been infectious. And, no doubt, they have a long, challenging route to follow.

It is they who deserve the support of progressives serious about ending U.S. (and other) aggression, reining in late capitalism and offering genuine hope for progressive change in the Middle East (and elsewhere).

## Footnotes

1. Quoted approvingly in Glenn Perusek's "A Horizon Lit with Blood: The U.S. Occupation and Resistance in Iraq," *New Politics* 38, 36-52 (Winter 2005). The quote was taken from Samir Haddad and Mazin Ghazi's "An Inventory of Iraqi Resistance Groups," *Al Zawra* (Baghdad), September 19, 2004.
2. As a result of the sanctions and subsequent release, on Saddam's orders, of more than 25,000 criminal elements on the eve of the 2003 invasion.
3. The right, along with liberal apologists, regards every inch as legitimate battleground. But let's ponder for a minute continuing outrage, as the West celebrates the liberation of Europe from Nazi and fascist hold 60 years ago, what it meant for the local residents having gone through not too dissimilar experiences.