

# Unraveling Iraq: The Sociopolitical and Ethical Dimensions of Resistance

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IRAQ, AS ONE LONG CONVERSANT in its fervent political history remarked to me, is much like the earth resting underneath a giant rock laid there for a very long time. The U.S.-led invasion of 2003 destabilized — if not moved — this rock and unleashed a multitude of organisms that were unknown even to local residents. The complexity of Iraq's political, social, and economic development, or lack thereof, requires a respectable repertoire of historical knowledge that necessitates a command of the local society in order to begin to piece together parts of this intricate jigsaw puzzle. Reliance on secondary sources would be desperately inadequate: One may begin to tackle this seemingly elusive country/society only if one experienced it firsthand and, then, departed to observe, analyze, and revise — holding nothing as sacred, but a commitment to rationality and a universalist belief in human agency and development.

A blurred vision persists, amongst many, regarding the opposition to the U.S. occupation of Iraq, on the one hand, and the nature of the insurgency in parts of the occupied country, on the other. An uncritical stance of support for the current "resistance" in Iraq has dominated political discourse on the left, which has shied away from questioning its tactics, goals, backers, and, indeed, social formation which is necessarily linked to the vision — or lack thereof — it espouses. The notion that since "occupations are usually ugly. How can then resistance be pretty?"[1] must be probed beyond its rhetorical façade. Equating this insurgency to the heroism of the Vietnamese struggle is naïve and unjust at best, malicious and demeaning to the history of struggle, at worst. These temptations must be resisted. Instead, a careful examination of Iraq's historical evolution is required, not a selective treatment in support of a specific hypothesis. Only with a strong dose of rational historical, sociological, and political readings of troubled third world regions can the antiwar movement begin to resist imperialism.

Adherents of the resistance-at-whatever-price notion essentially propound an ethnonationalist view of resistance in Iraq, and effectively dismiss universal norms. Occupation of land, it is affirmed, requires armed struggle to drive the occupier out regardless of the context and scope of this resistance, in particular its political and social dimensions.

Resistance is necessarily constructed within a sociohistorical context, and it must evolve to create the most effective conditions for both driving the occupying forces out and setting the country on a genuine path to freedom and progress. There is hence a dialectical relationship that forms the core of the principle of resistance, whose social ambitions dictate the format and mechanisms of struggle. For Iraq, emerging from a debilitating sanctions regime, a suffocating reign of terror, and three horrendous wars in as many decades, armed struggle is a perturbed option for people's very existence since it can only contribute to further shocking an already shaken social structure. Only a peaceable means to regain (a semblance of) normalcy through the careful reestablishment of society's civil institutions and the mending of ethno-socio-political bridges amongst city and village and within northern, central, and southern regions of the country can lead to a strong, countrywide social movement to drive the occupier (and all its vestiges) out and begin to repair the country's shattered ethno-socio-political mosaic. Iraq is a tattered country that needs respite from violence. This forms the crux for a people's aspiration for freedom and progress. Otherwise, the country would be bogged down into a morass of retreat and despair, a situation that will further confound people's suffering through immoral, tactically-ineffective killings of innocent civilians. A resistance that belittles human life is not worthy of the name, and in effect becomes a recipe not for liberation, but

subjugation, regression, and indeed perpetuation of foreign occupation. This is what imperialist forces prayed for, and got. Such a resistance has to be condemned wholly and unreservedly.[2]

## II

THE MODERN HISTORY of Iraq has conclusively shown the link between the pursuit of imperialist interests and the necessity for imperialists to rely on local dictators to achieve them. No one has fulfilled this role better, or performed a greater service to the imperialists, than Saddam Hussein for well over four decades. The capture of Saddam Hussein on December 13, 2003, marked a new episode in the unraveling of Arab-Western hypocritical rhetoric, and thus constituted a watershed in the role played by reactionary Arab-Islamic forces. A sizeable portion of the Arab and Muslim peoples has viewed the manner of his capture as a "direct insult to Arab and Islamic norms and ethics." Interestingly, those norms and ethics were not pricked by the news of uncovering mass graves, nor were they disturbed when Saddam Hussein's regime forcibly deported more than 750,000 Iraqis since the 1970s.

We have grown accustomed to neoconservative double standards and hypocrisy: "Sharon is a man of peace," George W. Bush averred months ago. Bush's apology for the Abu Ghraib prison scandal was proffered *not* to the Iraqi people against whom occupation, humiliation, and prisoner torture and abuse are carried out, but to Abdullah II, the monarch of Jordan. Moreover, the United States does not — beware — torture people, however, it attempts to interrogate them by "methods vetted by U.S. government lawyers." But our critique of western double standards must not ignore Arab hypocrisy towards crimes committed on their lands. Doing so will only contribute to an irrational atmosphere where the spreading of racist vituperation from the Right becomes more facile. For so very long, human rights, democratic principles, and education have shamelessly been disregarded in the Arab world for the purported "struggle against imperialism and Zionism." The Machiavellian end-justifies-the-means has proved time and again its nefarious effects on the development of social and political consciousness, and continues to perpetuate a vicious cycle of failure and blame devoid of rational self-critical assessment, which has made possible U.S. hegemony over the Middle East and its occupation of Iraq.

No one would disagree — even amongst the neocon hawks — that the U.S. expedition in Iraq serves American geopolitical interests first and foremost. The well-being of the Iraqis had never been spotted on successive U.S. administrations' radar screens. Many on the left, too, had only marginally been concerned with the Middle East and the insufferable injustices that plagued that world.[3] The machinations of a brutal dictatorship and imperialism's need to employ and rely on local despots were apparently eschewed from analysis by many.

However, the simplistic juxtaposition of the Iraq and Palestinian questions, and the lumping together of Arab societies as the same smack not only of ignorance, but condescension. The East, to many living in the West — regardless of their origin, background, or political flavor — seems to be perceived as a romantic locale where peoples are perpetual pawns in the imperialist struggle: Easterners must carry guns to combat jetfighters, tanks, and daisycutters. Abu Ghraib prison, the hallmark of Saddam Hussein's ruthless reign of terror for well over three decades, received little to no mention or criticism by — almost — anyone in spite of the powerful evidence presented by Iraqi opposition forces of every hue. Human suffering was rendered secondary to the rhetoric of a leader seemingly attacking imperialism, but in actual fact fornicating to the hilt with it.

Too many have been stuck between two inadequate visions: Apologia for U.S. imperialism and its destructive missions the world over, on the one hand, or cheering any misguided "apparent"

resistance to imperialism and occupation. Shouldn't progressive politics be able to avoid both these dead-ends? Unfortunately, the progressive alternative seems sorely lacking in analyses of the troubled Middle East.[4]

### III

THE COSMOPOLITANISM OF ancient Iraq, fatigued by more than four centuries of deliberate Ottoman neglect and marginalization, remained healthy at its roots and was marvelously reflected especially between 1918-20. The Iraqi nationalist vision was most evident in the June-October 1920 revolt against British rule in Iraq. Shiite and Sunni Arabs, from central and southern regions, joined forces, praying in each other's mosques, while Iraq's Muslims insisted that Christians and Jews (the largest single ethnic group in Baghdad at the time) participate in the raging protest marches and demonstrations since they were integral to the fabric of existing society. A genuine, viable, but seemingly tentative, sense of "citizenship" had been forming, which relied prominently on material facts: shared, common history and land. The *Shiite marj'iya* (the Shiite socioreligious-cum-cultural establishment) of Najaf[5] played a dynamic and key role in fomenting this bond. It was a modern bond, based on neither blood nor tribal relations. Thereafter, this formed the nucleus for the nascent civil society: the formation of numerous professional associations — including highly respected legal and educational professions, a vibrant press, political parties, artist ateliers, writers associations, labor unions, and an extensive, sophisticated coffeehouse culture. All of this continued throughout the first-half of the twentieth century, which effectively witnessed the climax of modern Iraq's cultural and intellectual contributions on a world scale: the pioneering of modern Arabic poetry, the free verse movement, and the establishment of the modern visual arts, whose contribution has been amongst some of the most richly nuanced and exquisitely aesthetic human endeavors.

This has to be contrasted with the tactics of the current insurgents. They have assiduously targeted any remaining semblance of modernity, and waged assassination and murder campaigns against any individual deemed "unworthy," which principally included seculars from all walks of life and from whatever religious or ethnic group. Iraq's Christians, Shia, and Kurds have also been punished by those insurgents for their unfortunate religious and ethnic affiliation. Thus, spinning the country into an endless, senseless spiral of violence and social disintegration. Religious or nationalist sloganeering of justice and liberation are just as hypocritical as that of Bush and the neocons. And just as one shouldn't fall for the claim that Bush seeks democracy for Iraq and the Middle East, so we shouldn't believe that the Islamist-cum-Saddamist insurgents are fighting off an occupying force in order to liberate Iraq.

Identification in Iraq has almost always been along political lines. Sectarian or religious strife had scarcely taken place on any tangible scale, as any astute and objective student of history and sociology would attest to. Almost every city in Iraq comprises a mixture of Muslims — Shiite and Sunni — Christians, and (until the late sixties, and mostly in Baghdad) Jews. Baghdad and Basrah, in particular, were the arch multicultural, multiethnic cosmopolitan cities on a par with many a current Western metropolis. Those Iraqis have coexisted happily, socialized together, intermarried, lived within the same neighborhoods, studied at the same schools and universities and worked in the same offices. Schisms, when they existed, were along political and ideological lines: Any one family could have atheists and devout believers in deity, and all in between. This peacefully coexisting and richly successful multi-cultural, multiethnic, and multireligious mosaic was peculiar to Iraq amidst most of the Middle East.

There have, however, been ardent attempts at falsifying Iraq's — and the region's — history. Rightist writers and thinkers have championed a theoretical framework that embodies cultural

"incompatibility" and other sanitized and fragmentary visions of what may be presented as "identity politics" or "communitarianism." It is painfully sad to witness respected and erudite leftist writers falling into this trap, willingly or otherwise. Tariq Ali writes in *Bush in Babylon*, hailed — by the publisher — as the "best selling history of resistance in Iraq that vitalized the antiwar movement":

"After Baghdad had fallen in 1258 a conversation took place in the Palace between the Mongol leader Hulegu Khan and al-Mustasim, the Commander of the Faithful and the last of the Abbasid Caliphs. The major historian of the time explained the defeat of the Caliph in terms of a lack of preparation and bitter factional struggles between Shia and Sunni notables. Some allege that the Governor of Mosul and the Wazir al-Alqami (senior minister of the court), a Shia, literally sold out to the Mongols and betrayed their ruler. The historian al-Athir charges the Wazir with having advised the Caliph to reduce the size of the army so that only 10,000 soldiers were left to defend against a Mongol cavalry of 200,000 men. Others still point the finger at the Kurds who had backed a previous Mongol expedition."[6]

The insinuation that Kurdish and Shiite treachery had been the reason for the fall of Baghdad to the barbaric Mongols smacks of an unscrupulous attempt at perpetuating the ethno-sectarian chauvinisms that have characterized reactionary politics in Iraq and the region throughout the twentieth century. I have checked al-Athir in various references, as well as other original sources (in Arabic) on the period, and found no such direct reference to the Shia and the Kurds selling out in the strife of 1258. Several of these primary references — for the interested reader fluent in Arabic — are available in major university libraries in the West.

Social harmony was never translated into harmonious representation at the political level. Ever since the formation of the Iraqi state, ethnosectarian chauvinism has been instituted in governance and the state structure. The British, aware of the nature of Iraqi society, played the card remarkably well when forced following the 1920 uprising to form a mandated Iraqi government. The deal struck between Sir Percy Cox and Abdul-Rahman an-Naqeeb (a wealthy landowner and Sunni notable whose lineage was purportedly traced to Muhammed, Islam's prophet) had formed the foundation for the nascent polity. The inhabitants of the north, the Kurds, and the south were excluded from the political map of Iraq. Proportional representation as indicated by elected officials from every corner of the country was never instituted. Until 1947, no Shiite ever reached the post of prime minister, and most definitely no Kurd ever reached this position in Iraq's entire history. Moreover, their share of ministerial portfolios has, at best, been minuscule. More critically, local and provincial offices have also been occupied, not by residents of the particular region privy to its many details, but by outsiders shipped from various regions around Baghdad. The institution of ethnosectarian, chauvinistic, exclusionary politics was central to allowing Britain — the imperial force of the time — to exercise effective control over, and ensuring compliance of, the minority in office: the Sunni Arabs, especially the landed class and former Ottoman officers.

The mold was fractured following the 1958 revolution that saw the overthrow of the monarchy. In the brief respite between July 14, 1958 and February 8, 1963 some serious measures were instigated to do away with old practices and turn the government's attention to seriously addressing the needs of the people: proper housing, health care, nationalization of industries, and agrarian reform. However, such measures were abruptly terminated or improperly implemented owing to the lack of systematic scientific planning and the non-democratic manner in which policies were designed and applied. The glimmer of hope towards establishing an independent, modern, and progressive Iraq was painfully shattered. The 1960s *coups d'etat* and governments that followed had one primary interest in mind: how to gain control over the central government as forcefully as

possible, and simultaneously subjugate or coax Iraq's inhabitants — especially in the more restive regions of the south and north. Since then the rhetoric of Pan-Arab unity has been employed *ad infinitum* over any serious attention to social, economic, cultural, and political issues. Crucially, the ethno-sectarian divide had begun to slowly, but ferociously, grow. Deliberate negligence of municipal, social, and educational programs for the north and the south had become the norm. Basrah, once perhaps the world's richest city, had become its most dilapidated. This is not solely because of devastating wars, but pointedly owing to the appropriation of funds to security and military programs with the unabated objective of pauperizing the populace in order to ensure (1) compliance, and (2) their inability to rise to meaningful positions of government. General Abdul-Salam Aref,[7] president from 1963 until his death in an air accident in 1966, was undeniably the arch proponent of such tactics, a staunch sectarian and chauvinist who had cruelly erected some of the most nefarious projects to marginalize and repress the Shia and Kurds.

#### IV

AL-THAWRA NEWSPAPER, then the Ba'ath's main propaganda organ, published a series of seven editorials[8] in April, 1991 to put forward their version of the causes of the U.S.-led onslaught on Iraq during the second Gulf war, and the ensuing uprising of March, 1991. Six of the seven editorials chastised the people of Iraq for all that went askew: the Al-Thawra editorialist turned social scientist, quite probably Tariq Aziz,[9] denounced the people for being "ignorant, backward" and "solely living for the purpose of eating and having intercourse;" whilst the "party" was blameworthy for being unsuccessful in presenting an "unparalleled ideological model." Needless to say, the "talented leader" had recognized all the ills in society, and "endeavored to rectify people's behavior;" however, we were not made privy as to why "he" seemingly did not succeed. Furthermore, the uprising — referred to in official propaganda as "*Ghawgha'iyah*," meaning, chaotic commotion — in the words of the same editorialist involved a voluminous record of collusion with foreign enemies of the nation; the uprising was, in short, tantamount to a "page of treachery and betrayal."

Conspiratorial and metaphysical reasoning is all that is proffered in the lone document of official explanation of the events of 1991: The root of the "conspiracy of March, 1991," according to the editorialist was laid at the hands of "a certain sect [i.e. the Shi'a] who has historically been under the influence of the Persians. . . They have been taught to hate the Arab nation." [10] As for the Iraqis in Nasiriya, Semmawa, and Ammara, known for their secularism, they are merely dismissed as "the marsh Arabs so accustomed to breeding water buffaloes to the extent that they have become indistinguishable from them." The 'erudite editorialist' went on to state that: When they migrated to big cities like Baghdad, they made their living through begging, prostitution, and robbery, not out of need but owing to their intrinsic degraded nature. Moreover, "these are not Arabs; they were brought with their water buffaloes from India by Mohammad al-Qassem [the Abbasid leader who conquered India in the ninth century]."

The March 1991 uprising was to become a watershed in Iraq's history. It revived the historical memory of the Iraqi nationalist movement, which reinstated itself into the political discourse. For the first time in modern Iraqi history, Iraqis openly discussed political ethnoreligious sectarianism and the politics of exclusion. It had become open season for critiquing every aspect of Iraqi society and historical development, or lack thereof. The exodus of hundreds of thousands of professionals, fleeing sanctions and repression, has driven people to seriously question such concepts as citizenship, nation-state and civil society. As expected, such act of sociopolitical catharsis would encompass varied manifestations ranging from the rational to the metaphysical, but nonetheless it would be a necessary exercise if Iraqis were to seriously think about planning a peaceful and happy future for their children. This exercise is far from over, and in light of the social ills bequeathed by

Saddam Hussein's rule, economic sanctions, and the current military occupation, the direction it could take is by no means determined. Democratization in Iraq necessarily requires the reestablishment of civil institutions and society. Iraq's entire educational, cultural, political, and social structures need be reconstituted. This is neither an exaggeration, nor a defeatist stance. It is reality.

No part of Iraqi society was immune to the erosion of the rational culture of politics. The effects had become palpable as early as the 1991 uprising when, for instance, the participants — many key individuals had actually come from within the ruling establishment — tended to view the cause they were fighting for in terms of norms dictated by the regime itself: the mentality of a rigidly pyramidal structure of (political) command and (military) order *ipso facto* intermingled with tribal and sectarian notions. Muqtada al-Sadr, the twenty-something self-proclaimed religious- cum-political figure, thus emerged. His power base comprised former security and military personnel and the (forgotten) unemployed. Notwithstanding his meager support within the Shia at large, his burgeoning political and militia power was swelling thanks to Iranian backing.

The Iraqi vacuum had — expectedly — become an operating ground for the intelligence services of regional countries — Iran, Syria, Jordan, Saudi, Turkey, and Israel — and for intra-governmental factional struggles within some of them. The long tradition of the *Shiite marji'ya* of Najaf being, in principle, attune to the separation between the religious and the political — however often serving a consultative role to the political — has slowly eroded due to a multitude of factors, the principal one being the current Shiite fear that they may once again be sidelined from Iraq's future political map.

The ruptured social fabric — namely, tribalism — and the eruption of primitive ethnosectarian claims to power in Iraq are an outcome of an imbalanced power structure that characterized the Iraqi polity even prior to independence in 1921. It is not an epiphenomenon of imperialism *per se*. More precisely imperialist forces have used and manipulated these contradictions that have originated and been perpetuated internally through constant reshaping, which effectively resulted in the decline of the concept of citizenry and the erosion of civil society — without which the former finds no real avenue for effective, meaningful expression, and is thus rendered vacuous.

## V

THE REMARKABLE CHARACTERISTIC that allowed Saddam Hussein to remain in power for so long did not merely stem from his Western support, but necessarily from his dynamic approach, within Iraq itself, to renewing tactics and strategies for maintaining power and control. During the 1970s, while serving as vice president to Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr, but effectively number one in government and party, he pacified left-leaning elements within the Ba'ath while annihilating Iraqi communists, and briefly pacified the latter while hitting the burgeoning Shia Islamists. And throughout, he began a vicious campaign of deportations starting with the Faili Kurds and ending with the Shia Arabs during the 1980s. He relied principally on his domestic base, which was selectively formed using the long-tried principles of mercenaries. Central to his approach was adroitly playing the Shiite-Sunni and Arab- Kurd cards, and the reshuffling of populations to perpetually create ethnic and sectarian frictions, and, thus, distrust at the very core.[11]

The regions west and northwest of Baghdad all the way to the Syrian and Jordanian borders have traditionally been poor areas that contained small farmlands typically inadequate to support the local population; they were mostly inhabited by Bedouins. Towns like Ramadi and Fallujah[12] have normally relied on small-scale trading and smuggling — the main trading routes linking Iraq to Syria and Jordan pass through these towns. They would thus become a logical constituent for Saddam

Hussein's machinery: provide them with positions to secure (relative) wealth — whether business contracts, or posts in the army, security apparatuses, and medium- to high-level governmental positions. Since the 1980s, the Dulaimis, Kubaisis, and Jumailis, the principal tribes of Ramadi and Fallujah, have grown omnipresent in government and in wealth. They are essentially hardy tribesmen who hold rigid religious and ethnic convictions. While they have indeed been in trouble with Saddam Hussein's mafia regime — that, as I pointed out above, circulates blame and rotates repression to ensure, at any one moment in time, a pliant and complaisant populace — they have grown to guard dearly their newly found wealth and power. Thus, they regard *these* winnings as rightfully theirs, and theirs for perpetuity.

Saddam Hussein had sought to employ God and flag to strengthen his grip over Iraq's populace, and shuffled and reshuffled the players as often as required to consolidate his power. Throughout the 1990s, during what was officially referred to as *al-Hamla al-'Imaniya* (the Pious Mission), he had embarked on a countrywide, monumental-scale building of mosques and the closure of bars, etc. In the same vein, and in order to create a threatening force to the Shia, especially in the aftermath of their uprising in 1991, he encouraged the spread of Wahabism in Iraq — a cult that never had a base in the country prior to the mid 1980s. Taking advantage of economic difficulties as a result of the sanctions, willing Saudi financiers supported the process, as they have throughout the 1980s in every corner of the world they could reach.

Saudi money literally bribed its way to such fertile areas as Fallujah, Ramadi, and the desert hamlets to the west of Iraq, which had become focal areas for the spread of Wahabism — a cult that was founded in the Arabian desert some 200 years ago, and relies for its interpretation of Islam on Ibn Taymiya, a reactionary theologian from medieval times. Its puritanical interpretations are in essence political rather than based in Islamic theology or jurisprudence. Its doctrine is defeatist and steeped in simplistic and naïve interpretations, typical of unsophisticated Bedouin surroundings. While it primarily preaches abstinence from culture, pleasure, and life itself, Wahabism holds strict views on other Muslim sects and other religions: It basically regards as apostates[13] all the adherents of the Shiite Islamic sect, and infidels all non-Muslims; and, therefore, their killing is regarded as a duty of the faithful.[14]

It should, therefore, become clear as to why Ramadi, Fallujah, and environs have constituted the primary locus of insurgency since Saddam Hussein's overthrow. Portions of the local population have provided the logistical support for all the Islamic fundamentalist terrorists (al-Qaeda supporters and other foreign extremist elements) who have been infiltrating through Iraq's unguarded borders. Religious extremism and sectarian chauvinism, on the one hand, intertwined with fear of losing wealth and power have become potent and real reasons to hold uncanny alliances. Patrick Graham, a Canadian journalist, wrote recently in *Harper's* one of the more accurate exposés on the nature of the "resistance" in Iraq:

The resistance was like a root fire, burning invisibly underground, waiting to explode. Village-based partisans were only one species of fighter; others included foreign jihadis, supporters of Saddam Hussein, unemployed army and secret-service personnel, and the specially trained suicide fighters of the Saddam Fedayeen, who had done most of the fighting during the war. As time went on, these underground elements linked up, their tangle of motives united under the banner: "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." [15]

IN THE MIDST of this came the U.S.-led invasion, an illegal, illegitimate, and unjust act that was bound to cause turmoil in the country as it abruptly imploded. I had opposed the war, and would do again now — as I opposed the sanctions regime and the current insurgency — for one fundamental reason: it had been a collective means of punishing the entire population of Iraq, when alternate solutions to ease suffering and overthrow the despotic regime/occupation could have been sought. Only a fool would not recognize that the United States is a modern, unopposed imperial power that is making the world less safe by the minute owing to its pursuing ideologically-driven policies. We should reject both the Bush policy — the rogue, imperial power that knows no limit — and the more typical U.S. imperialism that adheres feverishly to a policy of containment, support of the ugly status quo in the Middle East, and strangulation of its peoples. But in refusing both these choices, we should not be acquiescent of third-world dictators — neither those that exist nor the ones to be. Nor should it be an excuse for third-world leftists to ignore terminal ills in their own societies that gave rise in the first place to such contradictions.

Sentiments of support for peoples' struggle for liberation and progress, Iraqis included, may lead one to cheer for the "resistance." But this would be a serious mistake. One's support will sorely be misplaced in tribal and ethnosectarian elements that can never form the locus of a national liberation movement. Personal not national interests are at stake, and are of concern, here. Many mosques that embraced the extremist Wahabi doctrine are being shunned by the people at large. Nonetheless, intimidation, assassination, and pillage are guaranteed to silence many a voice. Simultaneously, U.S. belligerence will ensure more unnecessary civilian deaths and destruction. Iraq's torn social fabric is undergoing the very last vestiges of avoiding an internecine civil war. The absent voice of secular Iraqis has been deafening and surprising to everyone. It is not a question of a political void being filled by Islamists, Shia, or Sunni. It is more pressingly the dilution of rational voices that seek to build unity around hope and progress. Iraqis are paying the heavy price of four decades of authoritarian reign of terror, strangulating sanctions, three wars, and a heinous occupation. Fissures in the social structure are, as a result, growing deeper and scarier.

We must demand a timely schedule for the withdrawal of occupying forces from Iraq over a fixed, limited period. But, measures to address existing (and ensuing) chaos must receive important consideration, as well. No simple answers are available to the serious examiner, and the realities created by occupation have undermined the precarious social dynamics. A disgusting game of Russian roulette is being played with innocent Iraqi lives: The insurgents are prolonging the presence of occupying forces, and the latter are in turn lending "apparent" legitimacy to the Islamist and Saddamist claims. However, one thing seems certain, to me at least. Support for the Islamist-cum-Saddamist insurgents is tantamount to expecting the Michigan militia — and their ilk — to combat U.S. imperialist expansion: It is foolhardy, and dangerous.

## Footnotes

1. Tariq Ali, "The bloody price of occupation," *The Guardian*, February 14, 2004. This is slightly rephrased in the paperback edition of his *Bush in Babylon: The Recolonisation of Iraq* (Verso, 2004) as "When you have an ugly occupation you can't have a beautiful resistance."

2. Comparatively, Iraq has a rich history of constructive resistance to foreign occupiers and indigenous despots, one that held a genuine vision for freedom, liberty, progress, and democracy. *Harb al-Ansar*, the armed struggle led by the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) throughout the 1980s from Kurdistan against the central government, and the armed struggle waged from the southern marshes during the late 1960s by (the more revolutionary elements of) the ICP represent chapters of the annals of articulate and humane resistance, armed or otherwise. So, too, has been the complex — in cases paradoxical — Kurdish struggle for recognition against all central governments ever



since the establishment of the Iraqi state in 1921. In addition, one ought not to forget the massive popular uprisings of 1918-1920 and 1991, which are discussed later on.

3. It is neither my intention to engage in an exercise of retrospective blame, nor to consider the left as a monolith. However, a critical appraisal of political stances is important to understand the evolution and genuineness of one's thoughts and commitments. Amongst veteran political activists, Noam Chomsky stands as a remarkable example of steadfast decency and unstinting support for peoples' right to freedom: He, for instance, supported the Palestinians when it was unfashionable, and the Kurds when they hardly mattered.

4. Pan-Arab nationalism, not unlike other nationalisms, e.g. Zionism, is an ethnocentered political ideology having its roots in German romanticism. Inasmuch as one should objectively criticize the role Zionism played in retarding peace and progress for all inhabitants of the Middle East, one must, too, be questioning what Pan-Arabist rhetoric and "theory" have presented to the cause of peace and progress. Furthermore, one should rationally and resolutely probe if religious fundamentalism — seemingly anti-imperialist in rhetoric — can present a genuine, lasting force for liberation and human progress. A careful sociological treatment is necessary at least to combat unceasing racist attacks by the Right. (In order not to digress from the main issue, Iraq, the question of Arab nationalism will be given an in-depth treatment in a separate article. For a handling of the religious question see my "Deconstructing Arab-Islamic History: A Discussion of Its Evolutionary Dynamics," In *Islam and the West*, Michael J. Thompson (ed.), pp. 107-121, Rowman & Littlefield (2003).)

5. Najaf has played a prominent role in advancing discourse for political events in Iraq. It is one of the oldest cities in the country, and has been home to the founding of universities that began as schools of divinity and jurisprudence in the tradition of Oxford and Cambridge in England, but older. Owing to its rich intellectual atmosphere, it was central to the debate in philosophy, literature, and politics and remained so throughout Iraq's modern history. These were not at all, it should clearly be understood, madrasas in the fundamentalist style spreading over southwest Asia and elsewhere. They had been classic universities in the true sense as they offered courses in philosophy, literature (mostly Arabic with limited translated works), and Islamic jurisprudence. It had a large and healthy student body that came from all over Iraq, and Arab and Islamic countries; many of its graduates had become prominent communists, existentialists, Arab-nationalists, etc., in addition to the usual production of Muslim scholars. This practice has been characteristically Iraqi, and no Shiite or Sunni sect anywhere else in the Muslim world had offered anything similar. While the history of Shiism, being one of constant opposition to central authority — as represented by the Caliphate in olden times, and by the "nationalist" state in the 20th century — equipped these universities with a genuine sense of discovery, scholarship, and intellectual vigor. Iraq's richly multicultural and heterogeneous heritage has been the prime factor behind the flourishing of these institutions of learning. The city, its inhabitants, and universities have been a constant annoyance to the central governments of Iraq, and it was Saddam Hussein who delivered the severest blow to them by closing many of the universities, harassing students, and imprisoning and killing instructors and religious leaders.

6. P. 28. It should be noted that Ali refers to no book or article, primary or otherwise, for his allegations.

7. Aref was a Nasserite who participated in the February 1963 coup with the Ba'athists, only to lead another against them 8 months later. He was close to Nasser and received significant material support from Nasser's United Arab Republic during his reign. Aref originated from the town of Fallujah.

8. The seven editorials entitled, "What happened during late 1990 and the early months of 1991 . . .

Why did what happened take place?" have been compiled in a booklet published by the *Centre for Iraq Studies, London*, 34 pp. [in Arabic].

9. A long-serving Ba'athist who had occupied key positions since the early 1970s as Minister of Culture and Information, Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, all under Saddam Hussein's tutelage. He is now in U.S. custody.

10. History is often a victim of ideology, and the history of Shiism in Iraq has routinely been maligned. There has been little, if any, convergence in the historical development of Iraqi and Iranian Shiisms. Iran has been until roughly 400 years ago predominantly Sunni; it had converted during the time of the Safavids into Shiism and remained. To grasp the essence of the role successive Iranian establishments — religious and otherwise — have played throughout its country's modern formation, we need to examine the ethno-nationalist interests and primary political goals that have been the driving motive for their actions. Al-Ahwaz, south west of Iran, was — for instance — sliced out of Iraq and attached to Iran by the British in the aftermath of WWI. Its inhabitants, related to those in the neighboring province of Ammara in Iraq, have been at the receiving end of deliberate ethnic discrimination and political and cultural marginalization — in spite of their being Shiite, the majority sect. What need be understood is that Iran's policy — in Lebanon or now in Iraq — is grounded in the desire to enhance its geopolitical sphere of influence and power base: Political national interests constitute the core of their policy, not some intangible sectarian warmth towards co-religionists.

11. Thus one of the most complex issues: Kirkuk. The character of this city has been changed drastically owing to constant demographic reshuffling since the 1970s, so that it is now impossible to avoid a civil strife amongst its various communities vying for some national or sectarian claim to it.

12. One should note that the March 1991 uprising swept 14 out of 18 provinces in Iraq. The silent 4 were: Anbar (whose main towns are Fallujah and Ramadi), Sallahu- Din (whose main towns are Tikrit and Samara), Mosul and Baghdad — except for its al-Thawra district (aka Saddam city, now Sadr city), which was cordoned off to quell its uprising.

13. They use the term *al-Rawafeth*, or deniers of the Muslim faith as Wahabism perceives it.

14. This is the official sect of the Saudi Kingdom and some Gulf states, and is widespread in Syria, Jordan, north Africa, and southwest Asian countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan.

15. Patrick Graham, "Beyond Fallujah — A year with the Iraqi resistance," *Harper's*, June 2004, pp. 37-48.