

*Stephen Eric Bronner*

## Baghdad Memories

by  
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We arrived in the middle of the night, smuggled into Iraq via the Jordanian city of Amman, and the cameras were already waiting. So were the president of the university, his entourage, some bodyguards, a few agents of the regime, and the organizers of what would become four days of activities in Baghdad. Half-asleep, in an empty airport lounge with postmodern arches, some talked with each other and others with any reporter willing to talk with them. More than thirty of us comprised “US Academicians Against War,” an independent group of intellectuals from twenty-eight universities and a variety of disciplines. Officially we were on a “fact-finding” mission, but we realized that a week in Baghdad was not very long, and that it would not turn us into experts. Our purpose, in reality, was different: we wanted a glimpse into the society our government was planning to blast further back into the stone-age and a chance to offer our solidarity with the Iraqi people though not the brutal regime of Saddam Hussein.

Holding on to the distinction between the regime and the citizenry, however, called for resisting temptation. We paid our own way. But from the moment that the motorcade accompanied the bus to our elegant hotel, where we were fed wonderful meals and given more than adequate accommodations, it was clear that we were being seduced. Totalitarian leaders have always liked inviting visitors who might give them legitimacy. Thoughts went through my mind of Aristotle seeking to educate Alexander the Great, Lloyd George and Charles Lindbergh extolling Hitler, and Ernst Bloch and Lion Feuchtwanger pandering to Stalin during the time of the great terror. Every other corner had a poster of the great leader: Saddam smiling benevolently; Saddam with a derby looking respectable; Saddam reading the Koran; Saddam holding a rifle aloft; Saddam with his arm outstretched in a fascist salute. It was important not to become a dupe: I resolved to keep my wits about me and remember what had originally inspired my visit to Baghdad.

Our hotel overlooked the Tigris River; I soon learned that Iraq possessed the Euphrates as well as the Greater and Lesser Zab rivers. The country had once even served as a granary and, given the desert-like character of the

surrounding area, control over this water supply would obviously prove of great importance in any attempt to reconfigure the region. So it occurred to me that, in fact, oil and water can mix very nicely. Dreams of power over these resources surely complement the desire of the United States to establish a fixed presence in the region. Iraq will also provide a precedent that will give other recalcitrant regimes an inkling of what is in store for them. It is time for the world to learn who's the boss. .

A visit to the Iraqi National Museum, by contrast, gave an indication of who is not. It was pitifully empty and we saw the impact of cultural imperialism: obelisks and artifacts from this cradle of civilization now sit in the British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art for the edification of a few dozen connoisseurs and hundreds of bored brats on school tours. The famous Ishtar Gate of Babylon is in Berlin and the steele containing the Code of Hammurabi is in the Louvre: Iraq contents itself with the facsimiles as its humiliated citizens recall the glories of Mesopotamia and Ur, the city of Abraham, and the great Arab philosophers like Avicenna as well as Ali Baba. Better for Saddam to have organized a full scale legal war to bring these treasures back home—or at least be compensated for them—than the military adventures that had brought his people to the brink of ruin.

And the majority is on the brink of ruin. Other countries might be in worse shape. But there is no use employing what amounts to an algebra of misery: it was obvious that—here in Baghdad—things were bad enough. Many of the roads we saw from the windows of our bus were unpaved, sewage was spilled on the ground, jobless men sat on the corners, and emaciated animals ran around alleys. We learned that UNICEF had reported since 1991 a 160% increase in child mortality, arguably the most crucial indicator of public health, which constituted the greatest regression of the 188 nations surveyed. We also visited a hospital with rotting walls in which children lacked medicine, the new-born lacked incubators, and doctors said that they treated 150 patients a day. Then we were taken to the Al-Ameriya bomb shelter, the site where 400 women and children lost their lives in 1991. It was a stark underground casket preserved as a museum in which one can still see the twisted iron, the remains of bodies plastered against the walls, the blood of the victims on the floor and the ceilings. The United States claims the bombing of this shelter, which lies in a residential area, was a mistake. But that doesn't help the victims. This monument remains etched in my mind: it embodies the face of war and what these poor people might once again have to endure.

Iraq is not built on a war economy; its infrastructure is shot; it does not have the grandiose imperialist and racist ideology of the Nazis; it is not even potentially the dominant power in the region. The situation is not like that of Hitler during the 1930s when the famous policy of “appeasement” was applied. A better historical analogy exists: the period immediately following World War I. Just as the Treaty of Versailles insisted that Germany admit its “war guilt” and pay enormous reparations, so today, Iraq will be forced to take responsibility for its own destruction while oil profits will undoubtedly be used to compensate the United States. The Treaty of Versailles generated a new nationalism in Germany that undermined the Weimar Republic and fueled the Nazi movement. It is easy enough to imagine a postwar Iraq with irredentist longings, intensified hatred of the West, and contempt for what will surely become an American puppet regime.

Such developments might be avoided by simply carving up Iraq and creating a rump state. The United States will assuredly take control of the Iraqi oil fields after giving Great Britain its cut. Turkey has apparently been given a green light to occupy the Kurdish areas in the north and it has been offered \$15 billion as compensation for the stationing of American troops. Iran has designs, meanwhile, for a protectorate along its border. The potential for conflict between these two nations, and with a Kurdish people inflamed by nationalist yearnings of its own, should not be underestimated. There is no need for Iraq to exist within its present borders though, here again, resentment against the West and a politics of revenge would probably mix with a resurgent nationalism.

If Saddam and his henchmen could be ousted without devastating the country, creating a maelstrom in the region, causing an extraordinary loss of life, and totally perverting the international rule of law, then so much the better. But that seems unlikely. It has been estimated that in the first 48 hours 800 bombs will fall on Baghdad and 3000 on Iraq: genocide could result from what has been termed a policy of “shock and awe.” An internal memorandum from the United Nations estimating the costs of the war—an obviously minor detail still only scantily discussed in public by the Bush Administration—projects nearly a million refugees, hundreds and thousands of casualties, destruction of the infrastructure, and a proliferation of diseases. The impact on the economy of the region could prove devastating. There is even danger of nuclear war. Military costs and an American occupation, moreover, could reach into the hundreds of billions of dollars. As for

humanitarian aid, apparently, President Bush deems \$15 million sufficient. The casual way in which George Bush and Tony Blair are willing to gamble with the fate of an entire region and its inhabitants is unreasonable and imprudent, morally unconscionable and politically reckless. Opposition to the policies of the war mongers will have been justified even if they win their gamble.

The foreign policy of this administration has been a disaster from the beginning: its architects have refused to sign the Kyoto Treaty, denied the right of the World Court to judge Americans; undermined the improvement of relations with North Korea; created the deepest rift in generations with France and Germany; sanctioned the bloody policy of Sharon in Palestine; and generally acted as a bully ready to throw a tantrum should its wishes be denied. The United States is losing the moral high-ground it occupied following the collapse of the Soviet Union. World public opinion sees the only nation ever to have employed nuclear weapons, which has expressed its readiness to undertake a “pre-emptive strike” wherever it deems necessary, demanding war against Iraq for flaunting international resolutions pushed through at the behest of the United States and because that country *might* develop and then *might* employ nuclear weapons sometime in the future.

There is little reason to believe that the present policy will make the western world more secure against terrorism. We visited the Al-Kadihimia Mosque, the largest mosque in Baghdad, beautifully ornate and with a golden dome, and we found it packed on a week-night: we were told that just a few years ago it was empty. The bellicose policy of the Bush Administration is fueling the fires of fundamentalism and undermining the position of western-style liberals in the region. It is also producing an image of the United States as an imperialist war monger and, if Saddam really does have “weapons of mass destruction,” the circumstances in which—a war to the death—he will have the greatest incentive to deploy them. A boomerang effect, blowback, or whatever one wishes to call it, looms on the horizon. The present policy might well bring about precisely what it most seeks to avoid.

Saddam is a thug whose treatment of the Sh'iite majority and the Kurds has been ruthless and brutal. But the United States was willing to do business with him in better times just as it has been willing to deal with Batista in Cuba, Diem in South Vietnam, Pinochet in Chile, and Somoza in Nicaragua. In any event, the character of Saddam's regime became clear to us as we listened while a kindergarten class sang a hymn in praise of him, a

group of down-syndrome children pled for peace, and—far worse—some of his party loyalists gave a set of academic papers that made it abundantly clear how the authoritarian climate dulls meaningful discourse and casts a shadow over public life. No hint of criticism was expressed for the regime or any of its policies. Anti-Semitism of the old sort also cropped up in any number of conversations: even intellectuals often made reference to the existence of a Jewish conspiracy and the infamous *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Few knew about the Israeli opposition or even “Peace Now.” Just as the mainstream media in the United States has sought to identify Iraq with Saddam Hussein so has the Iraqi media sought to identify all Jews with Ariel Sharon.

Intelligent policies can't be built on stupid assumptions. The self-defeating character of such censorship and propaganda was obvious. New friends we met, in private, admitted as much. They were aware of their intellectual isolation. They criticized the militarism of the regime. They called for international organizations to monitor civil liberties. They knew what they were dealing with. But some of the best people in our party—a number were inspired by the Christian belief in good works and bearing witness—must have encountered different people with different views. They felt it was not our place to judge the Iraqi state, and believed that criticism would only undermine the antiwar effort. Others, including myself, disagreed. We argued. But we never lost our sense of common purpose. It was useful to recall the warmth with which we were greeted by so many ordinary Iraqis grateful for our visit and terrified by the thought of another war.

The final statement by our group should, in my opinion, have been more critical of Saddam's regime for exploitation of the misery caused by the sanctions; its corruption; its foolhardy militarism, and its assault on human rights. Ultimately, however, we were in Baghdad to show our solidarity with the citizenry and foster opposition to a looming war. We agreed on the need to clarify the regional implications and secondary effects that might result from the current policy, insist upon ending sanctions on non-military goods, and improve relations between the United States and Iraq. We were appalled at the thought of a “pre-emptive strike” and disgusted by a peculiarly American arrogance in the conduct of foreign affairs that reaches back to the Monroe Doctrine in 1812.

During the long plane-ride home, wondering how we would be received, I became angry thinking about our ever-narrowing national discourse, the shrill dogmatism of media pundits, and the cowardice exhibited by leaders of

the Democratic Party. We were returning to a country with a huge new agency for “home security,” new constrictions on civil liberties, and a mainstream debate that ranged from those ready to bomb Iraq right now to those willing to wait a few months before doing the same thing. “America! Love it or leave it!” and “My country! Right or wrong, my country!” I remembered such slogans from the time of the Vietnam War. But who were the real traitors: those who insisted upon continuing to send young boys to die in a hopeless war or those who sought to end that war?

It occurred to me that the same logic was now being used by those claiming that a UN resolution would somehow make an attack on Iraq more palatable even if the potential costs would remain the same. Just as being a patriot does not require agreeing with every action undertaken by the United States so is being an internationalist possible without supporting every action undertaken by the United Nations. Neither genuine patriotism nor genuine internationalism calls for turning oneself into a toady or an idiot. The words used by Rosa Luxemburg—that old libertarian socialist—in castigating Lenin and Trotsky in 1918 retain their validity today: “Freedom only for the supporters of the government is no freedom at all . . . Freedom is only and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently.”

As we were landing, I felt ever more intensely that every person I had met—the television reporter who had lost her niece, the law professor who had lost her aunt and cousin, the handsome taxi driver who had lost some fingers, and the veterinarian who had lost his house—might be dead in a matter of weeks. If nothing else: this trip allowed me to put a face on what we so blithely term “collateral damage.” I thought of those young people, like those in my classes, who might lose their lives in this war. All members of our group, I think, were inspired not merely by humanitarian motives, but also by the genuine interests of the United States. We had done what we could. Perhaps we were naïve. But then, should this war be averted, it will have been because naïve people around the world had risen up in protest. It will have been because they insisted on peace rather than war and proved willing—in the famous phrase—“to speak truth to power.”