

The Occupation of Iraq from an Arab Perspective

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When it comes to analysing the reactions of Arab countries to the United States' invasion and occupation of Iraq a clear distinction must be made between government opinions and those of the Arab public. This is particularly important given the distance and even schism that exist today between Arab populations and their governments, and in the case of the occupation of Iraq, it becomes quite evident.

The perspective between the governed and the governing bodies stems from very different and even antagonistic experiences. To the governing bodies, the United States has become an important protector of their continuation in power, while for the governed people, both authorities represent the principal cause of their oppression, and of a subsistence that has become more and more precarious since the Gulf War of 1991. Since then, the Arab region has undergone profound transformation in favour of a new United States hegemonic order that has favoured US access to the underground wealth of the region. The developments have permitted the expansion of US military presence in Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf countries, and have forged an ever-growing dependency of the Arab regimes on the US. These regimes, most of them clannish and based on policies of inheritance, and which therefore face a growing lack of legitimacy in their societies, understood that the new US order would guarantee US support as long as they accepted with it their project of strategy (military and security accords, the acceptance of the final situation in Iraq, and support of Palestinian-Israeli peace negotiations according to Israeli

and US rules). In return, they receive political support, economic aid (with the determinant influence of the World Monetary Fund) and *carte blanche* to manage dissidence with the repressive methods considered necessary in order to stay in power. This situation has set up a regional system of US client states that has brought an end to any existing capacity for joint Arab action in the defence of regional interests or to create a source of stability in the region.

Thus, although the United States military invasion of Iraq put all the Arab governments in a very difficult internal situation, they have shown themselves to be completely incapable of maintaining a position contrary to US interests. This difficult situation came as much from the awareness that endorsing exterior aggression against another Arab country would accentuate their political illegitimacy and very probably lead to violent reactions, as from the fact that the idea of a preventive attack and the application of the principal of the «change of regime» were unattractive options, given that there would be no assurance of such a situation turning against one of them in the future. From this state of affairs came the pressured proposal of the Saudi crown prince, Abdallah Ben Abdel Aziz, in a letter dated February 2003 that called for reform in the Arab world, in an attempt to get ahead of the US's insistent declarations about remodelling the region.

Despite everything, at the Arab League summit on 1st March 2003, which was held in order to make a decision in the face of the imminent American invasion, the Arab governments limited themselves to a rhetorical exercise during which they hardly dared state that they did not consider Iraq a threat and therefore did not want a war, and the rejection of Syria's proposal to adopt a declaration against any support of military action. How could the Persian Gulf countries pass such a resolution when they

RESOLUTIONS OF THE LEAGUE OF ARAB STATES CONCERNING IRAQ (June 2002 - June 2003)

RESOLUTION. British-American aggression toward Iraq, and its repercussions on the security of the neighbouring Arab states and on the security of the Arab nations (24-03-03). *Ministerial Council of the League of Arab States in its 119th ordinary session.*

Condemns the aggression against Iraq.

Asks for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all British and American forces from the whole of the Iraqi territory, and holds them morally and materially responsible for this act of aggression.

Reaffirms the commitment of all the Arab states to abstain from participation in any military action that usurps the sovereignty, security and territorial integrity of any Arab state.

Decision to instruct the Arab group in the United Nations to request an urgent meeting of the Security Council, and if the resolution is not adopted, request an urgent session of the General Assembly.

Resolution 6257 on the development of the Iraqi question (10-11-02). *Council of the Arab League in an extraordinary session, for the examination of the development of the Arab world, and the serious consequences confronting it.*

Reaffirms the resolutions adopted by the Council of the Arab League, in particular Resolution 227, adopted by the Beirut Summit of 28-03-

2002 and Resolution 6216 adopted by the Ministerial Council of the Arab League on 05-09-2002.

Welcomes Resolution 1441 of the Security Council, the only competent authority for the evaluation of the inspectors' reports. This Resolution does not constitute a basis for the use of force against Iraq.

Welcomes the acceptance on the part of Iraq of the return of international inspectors, and urges cooperation between the United Nations and Iraq as a prelude to the lifting of sanctions and the embargo.

Urges the inspection teams to undertake their tasks neutrally and objectively, and requests the inclusion of Arab experts in these teams.

Reaffirms the commitment of the Arab states to preserve the territorial integrity, security and sovereignty of Iraq.

Requests that the Security Council guarantee, on the part of Israel, the fulfilment of international law, and that it accelerate the application of Resolution 687 (1991) of the Security Council to dismantle the weapons of mass destruction of the Middle East, especially those of Israel.

Requests that the Secretary General of the League of Arab States remain in contact with the Iraqi government, the United Nations and other relevant parties in the matter.

http://www.arableagueonline.org/arableague/english/level2_en.jsp?level_id=219

were already under the protection of the US military? How could Egypt risk the 2,000 million dollars they receive annually from the US, thanks to which they are able to maintain an unproductive economic system that is riddled with corruption? How could Jordan risk a repeat of receiving the devastating punishment they suffered for not having backed the war of 1991? How could Algeria sacrifice the US support that contributes to such an extent to the triumph of the military junta over democracy and a civil society? How was Gaddafi going to risk his progressive reconciliation with the West...? But then, how could Syria not make the proposal with the knowledge that the United States discourse on the «remodelling» of the Middle East would, one way or another, continue to Damascus, in the realisation that after the suppression of Iraq it would be the only Arab country to have escaped the statute of client state.

However this was the manner in which the Arabs demonstrated their incapacity to control their own political development, and transmitted the message to its populations, a great deal of whom were already dissident, that they were incapable of acting together to influence the international community and defend the «Arab causes»: Palestine and now, Iraq. This had a devastating effect on the legitimacy of the governing bodies.

Later, on 9th September, the acceptance of the fact that the Iraqi Governing Council, appointed by the occupying forces, would take Iraq's vacant post in the Arab League, achieved nothing but the deepening of this divide, though it was a decision received with great enthusiasm by the spokesperson of the White House.

With no more than a simple analysis of the results of the opinion poll by the prestigious United States institution, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, carried out in seven Arab countries, Turkey and Israel at the end of 2003 in order to determine current opinions on the US and its policies after the invasion of Iraq, we can observe a large disparity between the opinions of Arab citizens and the position of their leaders.

Except in Israel, in all of these countries the citizens have shown themselves to be overwhelmingly opposed to the US, and in some cases such as Jordan and Palestine, this anti-American position reaches 99 and 98%, respectively, of people polled. Moreover, the study shows an intensity of attitude that is impressive. Even in Turkey, a non-Arab country with a pro-Western tradition, support for the US has dropped drastically in respect to polls carried out between 2000 and 2002, so much that today only 15% of Turks polled expressed positive sentiments toward the US, and the great majority reject even

RESOLUTIONS OF THE UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL CONCERNING IRAQ

S/RES/1441 Resolution 1441 (08-11-02): The Security Council orders Baghdad to destroy all its programmes of weapons of mass destruction against the possible use of force.

S/RES/1443 Resolution 1443 (25-11-02): The Security Council decides to defer the dispositions on the sale or supply of goods to Iraq, included in Resolution 1409 (2002), until 4th December 2002.

S/RES/1447 Resolution 1447 (04-12-02): Deferment of the «Oil-for-Food» programme for a period of 6 months.

S/RES/1454 Resolution 1454 (30-12-02): Strengthening of the sanctions against Baghdad. The Security Council extends the list of imports prohibited to Iraq.

S/RES/1472 Resolution 1472 (28-03-03): Recommencement, during a period of 45 days, of the programme «Oil-for-Food» for Iraq, suspended on 17th March due to the imminence of military action. More-

over, the Resolution reminds the parties involved in the issue of their obligations in matters of international humanitarian law and urges the international community to offer immediate humanitarian aid to the Iraqi population.

S/RES/1476 Resolution 1476 (24-04-03): Allows the application of the programme during a few more weeks and leaves open the possibility of renewal.

S/RES/1483 Resolution 1483 (22-05-03): Immediate lifting of all international sanctions imposed since 1990 on Iraq, except those on armaments; definition of the forms of United Nations mandate in the country, and establishment of a provisional authority governed by Iraqis.

United Nations Documents concerning Iraq:

<http://www.un.org/documents/scres.htm>

the limited support offered by their government to the United States in the invasion of Iraq.

In comparison to this almost unanimous position, the majority of Israelis (79%) expressed favourable attitudes toward the US and its policies.

Furthermore, it is significant that most of the Arabs polled also see the US as a potential military threat for their own countries and consider that United States policy is putting the stability of their regions at risk. What is more, compared with the situation in 2002, the struggle against terrorism led by Washington has radically lost credibility in these countries: less than a quarter of the people polled support it today. That is to say, the war against terrorism, as defined and put into practice by the US, has no social base in a good part of the world in which this war must be successfully executed.

A second particular concern is the increasing discredit that the United Nations is experiencing among these citizens. This sentiment is probably closely related to the progressive disillusion suffered by these populations upon seeing the UN's incapacity to force Israel to abide by its resolutions, in their recollection of the embargo, the human catastrophe to which the UN submitted the Iraqi population during 12 years, and the fact that the situation today between the UN and the US occupation of Iraq, due to resolution 1511, is ambiguous.

All of these positions are backed up by other considerations such as the fact that the US and its allies did not put enough effort into avoiding casualties amongst Iraqi civilians during the war, as well as the conviction that the US is now putting insufficient effort into the reconstruction of Iraq, and that

consequently living conditions are worse than they were under Saddam Hussein.

But it is very important to point out that these considerations against the US originate from a strictly political, and not cultural, valuation. Furthermore, polls show that far from withdrawing with «culturalist» attitudes in the face of an external threat, Arab citizens «hunger for democratic freedoms... and value highly the freedom of expression, of the press, a multi-party system and equal justice before the law». And while many defended a prominent role for Islam in politics, «that does not diminish their support for a system of government that guarantees the same civil liberties and political rights as a democratic system». However, the most significant detail is the fact that «those who defend a larger role for Islam in politics are those who express more interest in freedom and in free and competitive elections». This is the reason that stereotypical beliefs about the impossibility of adapting Islamic interpretations to democratic models should be brought to an end as soon as possible.

Moreover, this observation proves the extent to which United States policy is mistaken, even in its attempt to finish with the anti-American sentiment among the Arab peoples, in its opting for strategy of bringing the two peoples closer by extending the «common cultural values» that exist between both cultures. This is the US's objective in broadcasting the radio station Sawa and distributing the magazine *Hi* in the Arab world. Both are in Arabic, and were set up to have an influence on Arab culture, promote an interest in the American way of life, and also to voluntarily marginalize all political issues dealt with by this medium. But in reality such a cultural gap

does not exist (we only have to stroll through the Arab capitals to see how globalisation has already introduced these ways of life. Many young people dream of being able to study in the US or in Europe and of enjoying the benefits of a liberal economic and political model in their societies). Rather there is a deep distancing between the two cultures due to United States policy in the region, which Washington, however, does not seem prepared to modify. As a result of this, in their criticisms of the US a large percentage of people interviewed do not mention global references, but rather make an explicit reference to the governing administration; and as a consequence of this, the attempts to foster depoliticised Arab citizens who connect with United States culture will not reach more than a small elite, nor will it oust al-Yazira with its media-based predilections. This is why the majority confirm that they do not share in the belief defended by the official US discourse that the occupation of Iraq will contribute to the democratization of the region. Indeed, the existence of an imaginary Arab collective would be understandable, which would bring into doubt any confidence in the US ability to promote democracy,

given that historical experience shows that in respect to this issue double-sided talk has always predominated. Or, to rephrase, the discourse of democracy has only ever served as a moral justification for the imposition of other interests.

All this means, that contrary to what many think in the Western world, the misunderstanding between the West and the Arab and Muslim populations has deep political roots, and feeds on rising injustice and arbitrary acts produced by US-led international policy, who far from favouring democracy and respect for human rights, instead bring impunity to local governments. This sentiment is also largely shared by European public opinion, as is shown by a poll taken at the same time in European countries. These types of policies fuel nationalist sentiment that could become violent if the oppression and humiliation increase, and if military options continue to be imposed over political ones (as they have in Palestine and Iraq). However, the reaction comes, not from a repudiation of democracy, but from the desperation of civilian populations eager to be free, to be governed by a democracy and to be in control of their own destiny.