

Opinion

The record of UN apparatchiks and what can no longer be accepted in Iraq

“Whenever the government, always considered a bit foreign by the majority of the people, was negligent or ineffective, it was the existing organization of the ulama that partially filled the void for the majority of people.” This was not written in a confidential 2003 report by a witness to the effervescence of the Iraqi clerical scene after the country was taken over by a fully foreign power, but is rather a text about 10th-11th century Iraq under the Buwayhid Dynasty in a scholarly book by John Donohue, just published by the learned Orientalist Dutch house of E. J. Brill. An extensive funeral took place earlier this week in the holy city of Najaf for the tens of thousands who were killed during the uprising of March 1991. This rebellion, which saw Saddam Hussein lose power in 14 out of the 18 governorates in Iraq, was brought to a brutal end when the insurgents were left to certain death by “victorious” French and American troops stationed less than a few kilometers away. These soldiers looked on unperturbed as people in the streets were strafed by Saddam’s helicopters and run over by his tanks.

In a symbolic ceremony, those who rose in response to the notorious call made by the US president on March 15, 1991, to take matters into their own hands and overthrow the dictator, and who were left to their tragic fate by the international community, were finally laid to rest Monday next to the tomb of Mohammed Baqer al-Sadr, their leader who was assassinated on April 8, 1980. Mohammed Baqer al-Sadr represents the most dignified symbol in contemporary Iraqi history, and no sooner was Baghdad liberated from Saddam Hussein’s rule when its largest Shiite sector was renamed “Sadr City” in memory of Mohammed Baqer and Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr, a cousin who was assassinated in 1997.

How many in Washington or in the UN are aware of those memorable instances of Iraqi history? Certainly not the UN apparatchiks who were parachuted in recently in the wake of a Security Council decision which postponed the self-rule demanded by Iraqis as their right. The initial draft of UNSC Resolution 1483, which requested prompt passage to Iraqi self-rule, was undermined in the final version to delay Iraqis from assuming the destiny of their country, and to keep the burden of debt on Iraqis in order to bankroll redundant UN missions and compensate Western companies with a percentage on the sale of Iraqi oil. The resolution is particularly condescending toward those Iraqis who suffered and worked tirelessly for a change of government in Baghdad over the past 10 years by denying them the leading role in governing their country, while ignoring any serious human rights mechanism.

A major factor in the Iraqi tragedy has been the UN apparatchiks, who should not be given any role in deciding the fate of the Iraqis whom they allowed to be tortured, raped and massacred despite the clear text of UN Security Council Resolution 688, passed on April 5, 1991. It may be pointed out that UNSCR 688 requested the Iraqi government “to cease repression of its people” while the UN looked away for 12 years, and nothing was done until American troops invaded Baghdad despite UN

resistance, blinded by legalistic arguments over weapons of mass destruction for which Iraqis could not care less, considering how brutal their daily life was under a quarter of a century of Saddam Hussein's rule irrespective of his arsenal. Until those in charge of the UN bureaucracy are held accountable for their sustained and cruel silence, for their deals with the dictatorship in the infamous Annan-Aziz agreement of 1998 and in the processing of humanitarian aid in the country in continuous collusion with the Iraqi government, there can be no justice in Iraq. There can be no democracy without democrats, and this is also true for those in the UN who, in Iraq's case, ignored the most fundamental principles of human rights that they now pretend to defend.

The problem is not merely the appointment by Annan of the UN human rights high commissioner, a man whom Iraqi victims have never heard speaking on their behalf, to oversee the implementation of Resolution 1483, despite knowing precious little about Iraq and having maneuvered to get a four-month mandate to solve the Iraqi problem. The rot in the UN bureaucracy goes deeper. There is a serious UN-Iraqi problem of accountability, epitomized by the agreement Kofi Annan signed with Saddam Hussein in 1998. Not content with a pitiful record in his native Africa, where his name is now attached to the UN silence on the Rwanda genocide in 1994, the secretary-general has been unable to link a single success for human rights in the world with his name, least of all in Iraq.

Annan and the UN apparatchiks must now be prevented from projecting an unprincipled and shallow diplomatic mark on Iraq. In the first place, they must be held accountable for the willful negligence for human rights in Iraq over a full decade. There are, of course, some good people in the UN organization, and the Iraqis acknowledge the special rapporteur for human rights, Max van der Stoel, who tirelessly worked on their behalf throughout the 1990s both Butros Ghali and Annan have systematically undermined his repeated calls to deploy human rights monitors in Iraq to protect the people from Saddam Hussein's "unique repression in the history of post-World War II," as underlined by Van der Stoel in his annual reports. Time and again, van der Stoel was prevented from visiting northern Iraq on account of a "visa problem." Despite the endorsement of Van der Stoel's recommendations by the Human Rights Commission each year, not one of his recommendations was allowed by successive UN secretaries-general to be put in place.

It may not be easy to know how Iraqi society was in the 10th century, or the country's remarkable history during the past millennium, but as Mohammed Baqer al-Sadr receives the respect due to him in Iraq, one should perhaps question those, like Annan and his appointees, who ask: "Mohammed who?" Peace in Iraq will not come without Iraqi democrats taking over the destiny of their country with the help of those who assisted them in getting rid of a uniquely brutal rule, instead of career bureaucrats in Washington and at the UN, who hid when they were not openly seeking a face-saving deal for Saddam Hussein and closing their office doors to his countless victims. It is not thanks to those apparatchiks that Saddam Hussein's Iraqi victims are at last receiving a proper burial in Iraq.

The issues are quite obvious. In the first place, UNSCR 1483 must be amended to feature human rights and democracy as principle factors, and to recognize an Iraqi transitional government, which should be appointed within days to rule the country with the assistance of the occupying powers under strict democratic guidelines. Secondly, and in deference of transparency and accountability, Annan should be required to account for his open collusion with Saddam Hussein in 1998, and for ignoring the plight of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis throughout his mandate. He

should certainly be excluded from the destiny of Iraq. Short of such drastic but necessary measures, the descent into chaos, as seen today in the increasing number of US troops being killed across the country, will continue.

Chibli Mallat** is EU Jean Monnet Professor in European Law, St. Joseph University, and has actively worked for human rights and democracy in Iraq for the past two decades. He wrote this commentary for **The Daily Star