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- > Human rights in focus

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> AS HANS Blix, the chief United Nations inspector, presented his report to the UN Security Council, and Ariel Sharon's tanks and airplanes inflicted more misery on the Palestinians, a new initiative was quietly taken on Monday.

> In an event that barely found a mention in the international media, a group of Arab intellectuals published an appeal to their governments to press for the removal of Saddam Hussein to avoid a war that "threatens with catastrophe the peoples of the region".

> But their petition also sought something less tangible, if more profound - to shift international emphasis from Iraq's alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction to its human rights record. It called for "the rule of democracy in Baghdad, and for the stationing across Iraq of human rights monitors from the United Nations and the Arab League".

> The call was endorsed by 30 leading signatories that included the Palestinian author Edward Said; the Egyptian film-maker Yusri Nasrallah; Sadik Al Azm, retired philosophy professor in Damascus University; Abdallah Yusuf Sahar-Muhammad, professor of international relations at Kuwait University; and Jihad Zein, editor of the opinion page at Al Nahar newspaper in Beirut.

> The petition harks back to an almost forgotten strand in UN policy towards Iraq - one based on respecting the rights of Iraq's population rather than combating its government's possession of weapons of mass destruction. Underlying the petition is the argument that while the United Nations has sought to implement resolutions on armaments, it has not sought to implement its resolutions on human rights and that this disparity has made UN policies lopsided.

> UN Resolution 1441 on weapons of mass destruction, passed in November, authorised the return of weapons inspectors. Monday's discussion at the UN Security Council (with attendant blanket media coverage) focused on this issue. In contrast, the crucial UN Security Council resolution on human rights - Resolution 688, which was passed in 1991 - condemned Saddam Hussein's suppression of the Iraqi population but established no mechanism for its implementation.

> Later Max van der Stoep, the UN special rapporteur on Iraq, advocated without success the use of human rights monitors within Iraq, and the Arab intellectuals' petition is now returning to that call.

> Chibli Mallat, the Lebanese lawyer who drafted the Arab intellectuals' petition, said he hoped it would attract more signatures this week and then be presented by dissident Iraqis to the UN Security Council. "If Saddam isn't forced to flee, there will surely be a war, but it must be a war for Iraq and not a war on Iraq," he said. "It must be to secure the rights of the Iraqi individual."

> Mallat is best known for bringing war crimes charges against Ariel Sharon in a Belgian court over the 1982 massacres at the Sabra and Shattila Palestinian camps in Beirut, although he has also acted as an adviser to indict Saddam Hussein for crimes against humanity.

- > In this case, his intention is to get the call for human rights monitors adopted by the Iraqi opposition. The opposition, however, is not keen on the first part of the petition, which makes a call on Arab governments to put pressure on Saddam to resign.
- > Hoshiyar Zebari, a leading official in the Kurdistan Democratic Party, expressed scepticism about the suggestion that Saddam would ever resign, despite reported pressure from Saudi Arabia in recent weeks. "The talk of asylum originated in Baghdad," he said. "The idea is to buy time, a tactic to postpone the conflict. Saddam will never leave Iraq."
- > But Zebari said the Kurdish parties controlling northern Iraq would welcome human rights monitors within their zone and would support their introduction across the rest of the country. "For 10 years, we have wanted the struggle to be about human rights as well as weapons of mass destruction," he said. While Arab public opinion, more or less reflected by Arab governments, is against US strikes on Iraq, the Iraqi opposition remains concerned about the fact that the US has not clarified what kind of regime it wants to install in Baghdad.
- > Even Kanan Makiya, the US-based writer and professor who was one of three Iraqi intellectuals to meet George W. Bush in January, appears to have moderated his earlier enthusiasm for US troops "liberating" Iraq. Currently in Iran as part of an Iraqi opposition delegation preparing for a conference in Kurdish-held northern Iraq, Makiya told the New York Times: "I don't want a new page opened in Iraq that starts as an American occupation."
- > But what is at issue here is the aim of the war. The failure of the US and the Iraqi opposition to agree to any kind of programme for a post-Saddam Iraq makes the call for human rights all the more pertinent.
- > Whatever their level of cooperation with the US, Shia and Kurdish forces inside Iraq are clearly making preparations for war. Jamawar, an independent southern Kurdish newspaper reported this week that the Al Badr force of the [Teheran-based] Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq was taking up positions in the regions near Kirkuk, with supplies arriving from Iran.
- > And the New York Times reported that US intelligence officers had visited a large asphalt airstrip at Bakrajo, near Suleimaniya, where Kurdish guerrillas (from the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) and workers were removing caked mud and gravel from runways. "The field at Bakrajo offers unmistakable military utility," said the New York Times. "It is roughly two miles long - long enough for landings by heavily laden transport aircraft, including the C-17, C-141 and C-130, or for use as an emergency strip for fighter or attack jets damaged over Iraq."
- > War is close at hand, and war and human rights are uncomfortable bedfellows at best. But, ironically, to go to war with no commitment on human rights makes war all the more dangerous a policy.
- > In December, the Iraqi opposition conference in London declared that it would work towards referring perpetrators of genocide against the Kurds - including the use of chemical weapons at Halabja and elsewhere - to an international tribunal. But the 65-member coordination and follow-up committee appointed by the conference includes some former members of Iraq's security apparatus who are themselves said to be guilty of crimes against humanity.
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