

Iraq: "justice ... worth more than a billion barrels of crude"

This sounds to me (including because of the cite of course...), extremely cogent. CM

Iraq more like Lebanon than Vietnam

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Look to the precedents set in the region, rather than those that resonate in Washington, writes Maher Mughrabi.

Ever since George Bush announced "major combat operations" were over last May, those who supported the war in Iraq have been searching for the "tipping point" - that moment when things would start visibly improving. The renewed violence, and America's response to it, threatens to become a tipping point of a different kind - one that sends Iraq into civil conflict and may even end in the country's partition, eight decades after its controversial creation.

The Iraqi Governing Council's most outspoken member, Ahmed Chalabi, used to condemn such violence as the work of Saddam loyalists and shadowy outsiders. With Saddam captured and Shiites fighting in the streets, Chalabi has been strangely silent, even as other members of the council condemn US actions and resign.

Those opposed to the war suggest we are seeing a classic "resistance" movement, and draw parallels with Vietnam, which resonate in Washington and Canberra. Yet they too reckon without the effect of a

quarter-century of dictatorship in Iraq and ignore a far closer comparison - with Lebanon.

When Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, winning the conventional war was relatively easy. It was Lebanese factional politics and militias that proved too much for both the Israeli occupier and the United Nations - which in Beirut, as in Baghdad, entered the fray belatedly and was widely perceived as a fig leaf for a politically motivated war.

The Israelis built their dream of a pro-Israeli Lebanon around the Phalangist militia leader Bashir Gemayel. A bomb killed him and their plan. Responsibility for that assassination and the atrocities that surrounded it has since been the subject of conspiracy theories and accusations - but seldom of transparent legal scrutiny.

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In Iraq, it is a year since the cleric Abdul Majid al-Khoei, groomed by America and Britain as the acceptable face of Shiite Islam, was assassinated in Najaf, a crime for which the radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr was recently indicted.

At the time of Khoei's murder, Lebanese lawyer Chibli Mallat wrote in the Beirut Daily Star that a judicial investigation was "the most pressing task of Iraq's Governing Council".

Surely some mistake. More important than elections? More important than restoring the flow of Iraqi oil to markets? But Mallat knows of what he

speaks.

Building institutions for justice and having them operate for people to see would be worth more than a billion barrels of crude. It would help convince Iraqis that the days of impunity were over and that rulers (and invaders) might be forced to account for their actions.

A lot of realities stand in the way. The tendency in authoritarian societies is for laundry to be washed in private. Whether Iraq's laws should be religious or secular is itself a political question. And the US is notoriously reluctant to sanction any tribunal that might call its own officers into question.

Leading analysts have assured us that most Shiites are for Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and not Sadr. But more telling has been the admission that the demographic that supports Sistani does not march in demonstrations of the kind Sadr has organised.

In an established democracy this might not be cause for concern. In Iraq, as has been demonstrated time and again, an organised minority can dictate circumstances to the majority.

Those in the West who raise their voices to shout "Yankee go home!" may wish to ponder the rise of the Taliban - the most extreme faction within the majority - in an abandoned Afghanistan.

Yet the longer the US-led coalition remains, the more Iraqis will question its intentions and methods. To truly combat terror, superior force is never sufficient - indeed, superior force is the reason many terrorists use such methods to begin with. If the occupiers are to win support, they must demonstrate that they have an alternative that the occupied can identify

with. And where Iraqis can rebuild Iraq, they should, with foreign corporations and workers excluded as much as possible.

The time scale for turning Iraq into a democracy is daunting. Many analysts talk in decades. Do Americans or their allies have the stomach for this sort of commitment in a region where they do not have the same assent they enjoyed in a shattered postwar Europe?

For all the fine words of defence secretary Caspar Weinberger as he stood at Beirut harbour more than 20 years ago, the West had to settle for far less than a beacon of democracy in Lebanon.

After 241 US marines died in a single attack, Ronald Reagan (a president far more electorally secure than George Bush) and UN forces from America, France and Italy left the country to further years of war and partition, culminating in a quasi-democracy under Syrian occupation.

For the Lebanese, who had by then developed a thorough disgust with politicians, this was hardly enduring freedom or infinite justice, but it did give them a chance to go about their lives in comparative peace.

Such an option is not on the table in Iraq. None of its neighbours has the power over it that Syria has over Lebanon. Yet each will work to exert its own brand of influence. Should the Coalition grow tired of managing such tensions, as the British grew tired of managing their strife-torn mandate in Palestine after World War II, who knows what may ensue?

Talk of respecting Iraq's "integrity" rings rather hollow with the peoples of the region, who remember that Western powers forged Iraq to begin with. Yet what the West's foremost power does next, who it chooses to take with it and on what terms, remain crucial questions not only for Iraq but

for hopes of a coherent international order in the future.

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