

Constructive about Iraq

Disagreeing about current plans for Iraq is portrayed as being destructive. This is not only incorrect, but also legitimizes the occupation.
By *Nazneen Ahmed*

Writing in [an article](#) in *The Guardian* on 5 July 2004, the British Labour MP and Prime Minister Tony Blair's Special Envoy to Iraq, Ann Clwyd, argued that people who oppose the American and British occupation of Iraq have a negative and destructive approach because they do not offer any constructive political solution; all they want, according to her, "is for the Americans to leave".

Ms Clwyd's argument is one commonly advanced by advocates of the occupation of Iraq. It is a disingenuous argument steeped in neo-colonial and imperialistic assumptions. It is also bad in terms of the logic employed. I'll address the logic first and show the assumptions afterwards.

The argument Ms Clwyd has put forward goes like this:

1. Saddam Hussein and "his henchmen" were unspeakably evil; it is a good thing they are gone.
2. Members of the US/UK-appointed Iraqi government are brave people—curiously, she finds, not because they stepped up to do the dangerous work of providing Iraqi faces for government by the US, but for escaping attack or suffering loss under Saddam Hussein, which they did by fleeing Iraq.
3. An occupation-commissioned poll is reported to have found overwhelming support for the interim government less than a week after the government was appointed.
4. The so-called resistance fighters are bent only on creating chaos: they are anarchists.

Those are the premisses of the argument. From there—and here comes the leap in logic—the argument moves to the conclusion that the present government must be supported and the resistance, "which has no alternative or agenda other than more bloodshed and chaos", rejected.

Let's consider the premisses first. I provide some notes and comments to put the premisses in perspective. In the course of discussing the premisses it should become clear that the interim government is a fudge, and that to support it is to abet in denying the people of Iraq real democracy.

Premiss 1: No right-thinking person would contest Premiss 1. Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath party regime was repressive and brutal, and violated human rights with impunity; it is indeed a good thing that it is gone. What one questions is the method and timing of its removal. The issues they raise need to be well understood.

Method of removal. The US and UK broke international law when they invaded Iraq in March 2003. If there was a case for removal of the regime to be made, it should have been argued at an appropriate forum (such as the World Court or the UN) and proportionate action taken on the basis of international law. (The argument at the UN Security Council was abandoned when the US and UK found that they were not going to win a vote sanctioning war.) If international forums or international law are not properly equipped to handle the situation, they should be suitably reformed. (Such reforms, however, have the disadvantage of having to be democratically authored and universally applicable—properties which are not conducive to hegemonic rule. Additionally, fair hearings in which both sides are allowed to argue their points can bring uncomfortable facts to light.) Further, at least 12,000 Iraqi civilians have been killed since the invasion began, and the human rights of thousands more Iraqis were and still are being violated by the occupation forces. In short, the method of removing the regime was both illegal as well as horrendously costly in terms of human lives and goods lost and of the suffering caused. It is morally scandalous and an insult to the world's

conscience to argue that 12,000 lives and the destruction of international law was a price worth paying for the removal of the Saddam Hussein regime.

Timing of removal. Saddam Hussein has been in power since 1968: behind the scenes till 1979 and openly from then till 2003. His crimes date from the 1970s at least. Till his invasion of Kuwait in 1990, he was supported and encouraged by US administrations, most notably by the Reagan and Bush I administrations (in the 1980s). It was in the 1970s and 1980s that Mr Hussein committed his worst crimes, which included starting the war with Iran in 1980 and the slaughter of thousands of Kurds with chemical weapons in 1988. Despite knowing about these crimes, US administrations of those years chose to support Mr Hussein so as to have a strong man they could rely on in their efforts to destabilize and weaken revolutionary Iran. Since 1990, Mr Hussein has been “in his box” as Secretary of State Madeleine Albright liked to say during her tenure as Secretary of State (1996–2000). He has committed no new crime since 1990 that matches the scale of his earlier crimes and that might serve as a *casus belli*. He certainly did not have any connection with terrorism aimed at the USA or the West. It should therefore be clear that there were other motives behind the invasion. Bringing Mr Hussein to justice or democracy to Iraq were not among them.

Ms Clwyd is indulging a well-cultivated taste for chicanery when she indicates Saddam Hussein's crimes and brutality as a worthy reason for invading Iraq. That appeal to morality is in fact the only justification left the invaders. It is a surreal sight when someone involved in the killing, mutilation, and suffering of thousands of innocent civilians in a poor and defenceless country unashamedly moralizes about the same crimes committed by another.

Premiss 2: Premiss 2 (brave ministers) is irrelevant. The bravery of a government's ministers does not confer legitimacy on that government. One might as well make legitimacy a function of the prime minister's body weight or the number of opponents he has personally shot dead.

Premiss 3: Like Premiss 1, this premiss (opinion poll results) is another attempt at suggesting a conclusion through flexible logic.

If the issue is the legitimacy of the interim government (in the sense of being representative of the Iraqi people), this premiss also is irrelevant. A representative government is determined by free elections. Opinion polls cannot replace elections in the selection of democratic governments. However, there is another important and directly related issue the opinion-poll premiss raises: the proper role of the interim Iraqi government appointed by the US and British governments, and the way this government is perceived by Iraqis.

The interim Iraqi government is meant to be a caretaker government for six months till the elected government takes office. The role of the interim government should have been to quickly provide basic infrastructure and services and start the election process. Instead, it concerns itself with matters for which it has no political or legal mandate: most importantly, the making of laws on behalf of the Iraqi people. Such a responsibility is the right of an elected and representative government—not that of an interim government appointed by foreign powers, and most certainly not that of US collaborators. This government has failed egregiously in its proper tasks of administering the country and starting preparations for elections in early 2005.

Then there is the issue of interpreting the results of an opinion survey. An opinion poll that concludes Iraqis support the interim government could be a liberal interpretation of actual findings. A “Yes” could have been answered to several question without meaning that Iraqis support this specific interim government. For example, first, Iraqis may support the transfer of power from the occupying forces to native Iraqis. This does not necessarily translate into support for an interim government filled with Iraqis who formerly lived in the US and EU. (It is instructive to learn that 22 of the 36 Iraqi ministers hold foreign passports, mostly American and British.) Second, Iraqis may support the idea of an interim government but not the present configuration of US collaborators. Third,

support for a group of US-appointed interim ministers might be support for them specifically as *interim* ministers with administrative tasks—not as ministers entrusted with political, economic, social, and legal reform. Ms Clwyd goes neither into these details of the poll nor tells us about the cross-section of the population surveyed—which is remiss when quoting an opinion poll. Without this crucial information, the results cannot be placed in proper perspective, and cannot properly be used as evidence of Iraqi support for the present interim government.

The effect of Ms Clwyd's reference to the poll is two-fold. First, to indicate endorsement by ordinary Iraqis of the appointed interim government. Second, and more importantly, to fudge the issue of the political legitimacy of the interim government in the interim government's favour. It is crucial to remember that the interim government is not elected. This means it is not representative of the Iraqi people and therefore does not have the political legitimacy required to make laws for the Iraqi people. Suggesting legitimacy via opinion poll is an underhand attempt at establishing credentials of representativeness for the interim government.

Premiss 4: That the resistance “has no alternative or agenda other than more bloodshed and chaos” is an assumption. One cannot know whether the resistance has an alternative agenda till one starts to discuss agendas openly. The question ought to be: How does one initiate fruitful discussion and how does one act on the results of such discussion? The answer is glaringly simple: parliamentary democracy. Hold elections, and let the representatives of the people discuss and decide.

If free elections are the objective, the way forward is also simple. All US and UK forces should leave Iraq and the US and UK should not be involved in further economic planning for Iraq (though private firms may be granted contracts). A UN peacekeeping force, led preferably by a neutral European country such as Sweden, a non-Arab, non-Shia Muslim country such as Indonesia, or a politically stable and democratic Latin American country

such as Brazil (and not by Iran or any Arab country), should be deployed to maintain order. UN forces should recruit and work together with Iraqi security forces. An interim government made up of Iraqi administrators with experience of working in Iraq (as opposed to exiles who know Washington and London better than they know Baghdad or Basra) should be charged with rebuilding infrastructure and basic services in coordination with UN committees (from which US and UK officials are excluded). Free elections in all parts of the country must be held as early as possible and control then handed over to the representatives of the people.

The roadmap outlined above is simple only if the world system is predicated upon genuine democracy and if its sole superpower genuinely wished to bring democracy to Iraq. Unfortunately, this is not the case, and one can forget about the simple solution. The US objective is to gain military control of Western Asia. Because of the oil resources of the region, such control would give the US control over the world economy, thus realizing its goal of becoming the world hegemon. (The UK gets the job of first footman.) No future US administration can afford to withdraw from Iraq in the near future, even if it means that the US military has to lay waste to Iraq's cities in order to stay. All the talk about turning Iraq into a beacon of democracy is for the birds. The US has made clear that it wants exclusive and tight control of Iraq, and that it will impose a suitable version of democracy on Iraq, with military force if required. There is to be no serious discussion of alternative agendas.

This leaves only one way forward for Iraqis with other ideas: armed struggle. The Iraqi resistance recognizes this and has embarked upon the struggle. The resulting confrontation, considering the extent and brutality of the occupation, does not make for the pretty postcards from Baghdad Ms Clwyd would very much prefer. The carnage is brought about by **both sides** with the general civilian population being caught in the middle. That much should be obvious to anybody. Ms Clwyd says this is the fault of a pointless and destructive resistance. This would be so if one were to accept that it is the US that decides how Iraq is

ruled. If, on the other hand, you believe that Iraqis must rule themselves, then it is the occupying powers themselves who are to blame—because they are denying Iraqis a genuinely democratic process in which the resistance groups can participate politically. The alternative to political participation that Ms Clwyd advocates is peaceful submission to another tyranny. That's the essence of her position and that of the occupying powers. Let's have no illusions about their intentions. Actions, she says, speak louder than words.

The Iraqi Resistance and World Freedom

It is only when one understands that the US and UK intend to occupy Iraq till a compliant government and US military bases have been established there that one sees the wider cause in which the Iraqi resistance is involved: freedom from American hegemony. Iraq's importance is not that it has become the crucible of terrorism Mr Blair so histrionically announces it to be, but that it is the “petri dish” (*New York Times*) in which America synthesizes a radical new strain of colonialism. That colonialism is predicated on unfettered corporate power and the neoliberal ideas associated with it, which, if applied to the whole planet, threatens the very survival of man and the Earth as we know it.

This is not to say that the Iraqi resistance is fighting for the survival of the planet, but that its struggle is part of the larger struggle to maintain the richness and diversity of life and civilizations on Earth, safe from the ravages of the American–British economic model and allowing countries to find, on their own, the models of development best suited to them.

What this person opposed to the occupation of Iraq wants is not just that the Americans leave, but also that the Iraqis get representative government and that international institutions be democratized and international law strengthened so that tragedies like Iraq do not occur again. These are issues that can be resolved in a civilized way, but won't be because the US objective is hegemony.

Ms Clwyd argues from within this view of

world order, in which the powerful subjugate the weak and the weak submit gladly. Spoiling that happy picture, however, are two alternative scenarios: (i) The weak fight back by spreading chaos in order to destroy their oppressors; (ii) We establish a world order of genuine freedom, opportunity, and equality for all.

In Iraq today, US hegemony battles a resistance that aims to sap the oppressor by spreading chaos. It could be a long, exhausting struggle with victory for either side being short-lived. The US and its hangers-on will lose all moral authority and will have to depend entirely on military force for its policy of subjugation. Which is a recipe for increasingly bitter conflict in the long term. Is this the world we want when we have the option of building a world based on genuine democracy and freedom for all? Iraq is indeed a petri dish. But what crystallizes from the mix (colonialism or a wakening of conscience), will determine whether the world embarks upon a path of conflict or of freedom and peace.

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SIDEBARS

Hubris, Deceit, and National Self-Interest

I don't see why we need to stand idly by and watch a country go communist due to the irresponsibility of its own peoples.

– *Henry Kissinger, on the eve of socialist Salvador Allende's victory in the Chilean election in 1970.*

SIDEBARS

Nominal Democracy

Defining democracy in terms of goals such as economic well-being, social justice and overall socio-economic equity is not...very useful.

– *Samuel Huntington, The Modest Meaning of Democracy (1989)*

A Responsibility to Maintain World Order

The United States has global interests and responsibilities... [The US] must be concerned more with the overall framework of order than with the management of every regional enterprise.

– *Henry Kissinger, in his 'Year of Europe' address (1973).*

Sure, They'll Take It

[Americans believe] that the United States stands for something in the world—something of which the world has need, something which the world is going to like, something, in the final analysis, which the world is going to take, whether it likes it or not.

– *UK Foreign Office minister at cabinet meeting post WW2, quoted in The Issue of War (1985) by Christopher Thorne.*