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Sluglett, P.

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Iraq after the US Invasion

PETER SLUGLETT

In the months leading up to the US invasion of Iraq, I did not believe, and said so in public, that Iraq was in any way directly responsible for 9/11, or that the Iraqi regime had any substantive links with al-Qa'ida, or that it was likely that Iraq was actually able to field weapons of mass destruction. I believed that Iraq had probably tried to obtain weapons-

Peter Sluglett is a historian of the modern Middle East, who has devoted quite a lot of his career to the study of late nineteenth and twentieth century Iraq. His best known book, co-authored with his late wife Marion Farouk-Sluglett, is *Iraq since 1958; from Revolution to Dictatorship*, of which a third updated edition appeared in 2001. In addition to his academic work, he has also been politically engaged with the exiled Iraqi leftist and Kurdish opposition for perhaps thirty years. The author wishes to emphasize that he is a historian of the Middle East, not an expert on US foreign policy.

grade plutonium, and I knew that it had actually obtained centrifuges from Germany, as well as the means to manufacture chemical and biological weapons from Germany and the US. I surmised, from a position of total scientific ignorance, that Iraq probably possessed most of the ingredients necessary to manufacture weapons of mass destruction, but that it was some way off from actually doing so.

I also knew that Iraq had one of the most vicious and unscrupulous regimes in the Middle East, if not the world; that Saddam Husayn and his cronies had between them murdered and imprisoned hundreds of thousands of Iraqi citizens, and that any Iraqi who could escape from Iraq (and, given the long and largely unguarded frontiers, this was not too difficult) would do so. There were, in January 2003, some two million Iraqis living in exile in other Middle Eastern countries, in

Europe, especially in and around London, and in the United States. I knew that an essential ingredient for peace and stability in the Middle East, apart from a just and permanent settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian issue, would be the removal of this terrible regime. And finally, I knew that, much as they might desire its removal, the people of Iraq were not, and for the foreseeable future would not be, in a position to remove it by themselves. And for that reason, I supported an American

invasion whose ostensible objective was to remove this vicious dictatorship, knowing full well, that Saddam Husayn owed his own survival throughout the 1980s to the support of an American administration which included such knights in shining armour as George Bush senior and his good friends Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld. Perhaps I was naïve, but I could see no other way of removing Saddam Husayn.

However, I pretty well withdrew my general approval of the action taken by the US to remove the regime on 9 April 2003, 21 days after the invasion was launched, the day on which Saddam Husayn's regime fell apart. Every day since then has brought mounting evidence of the almost incredible bungling and incompetence which has attended the American administration of the peace. It is not as if no one in the administration had given any thought to what might happen after an American victory—which, of course, could scarcely have been in doubt. An article in the *New York Times* on October 18 reported at length on a State Department project initiated in April 2002 involving over 200 Iraqi lawyers, engineers and businessmen, divided into working groups 'to study topics ranging from creating a new justice system to reorganizing the military to revamping the economy.' Surprise, surprise, the Pentagon ignored most of the project's findings, which included, for example, a much more dire assessment of the dilapidation of the country's water and electricity supplies than the Pentagon assumed. It's also fascinating that the working groups predicted that a fair amount of looting would take place. It is regrettable, to say the least, that some of the project's cautionary findings were not acted upon much sooner. It will be fascinating for future historians to try to work out 'what went wrong'; tawdry turf wars between the State Department and the Pentagon are presumably at the root of much of the mess.

It is not entirely clear how or why the situation unravelled so quickly, but here are some general pointers. In the first place, the invasion itself lacked the broad legitimacy which a UN mandate would have conferred upon it. Undoubtedly, the reason why the invasion took place when it did was a general sense, on the part of the US administration, that the large body of troops which it had transported to the region could not be kept in place there indefinitely. The Bush administration seems to have simply ignored the importance of taking the international community along with it, as it has discovered at its expense.

In the immediate aftermath of the attack on Iraq, when no weapons of mass destruction were found and went on being not found, it was argued that as Iraq was the size of California, it was not all that surprising that US troops could not find anything—they could not search every nook and cranny over such a wide area. At the same time, Rumsfeld and the US regional and field commanders, to this day, assert that there are ample numbers of troops in Iraq. One cannot have it both ways; if there are not enough troops to find the weapons of mass destruction, then there are not enough to stabilize or pacify the country, period. And then there were the issues of electricity and water. Obviously, the infrastructure had been in a mess since the Iran-Iraq war, but it nonetheless seemed almost incredible to many Iraqis that things took so long to be put right, in spite of sabotage and the difficulty of getting large electric generators into place.

Every day we hear on the news that another US soldier, another group of Iraqi civilians, has been killed by forces still loyal to Saddam Husayn, or by terrorists who have infiltrated the 'porous' borders. Almost all these attacks take place in a relatively small area, the Sunni

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rectangle (rather than triangle) bounded by Baghdad, Takrit and Faluja, and al-Anba', the provinces of Diyala and Dulaym. This was and remains the heartland of support for the regime. Although Sunni Arabs only form between 15 and 20 per cent of the population of Iraq, they have nonetheless ruled the state since its foundation under British auspices after the First World War. Under any future regime, it is almost inconceivable that they will continue to do so. This particular form of resistance is probably not the expression of an especially widespread sense of outrage at US occupation, although the inability of the US to maintain order, and get adequate water and electricity up and running again, means that the US is not quite as welcome as it thought itself entitled to be. This resistance is a kind of last stand, an effort on the part of a fairly small group of desperadoes who have no future in a reconstituted Iraq and who feel that they have nothing to lose. Obviously, those behind such incidents are Sunnis, because there are no Shi'is in that part of Iraq. But this is very far from being a 'religious resistance', although there are undoubtedly some *salafis*, or Sunni fundamentalists, among the resisters. More pertinently, Saddam Husayn and his circle came from Takrit, and were all Sunnis. But what is much more important than the fact that they were members of the same religious sect is that they were all from the same area, had gone to school with each other, knew each others' relatives, and so on. So, to speak of 'Sunni opposition' is both misleading and disingenuous.

The US administration has made a large number of serious mistakes. In the first place, as I have already implied, not enough troops were involved in the conquest of the country—or at least, not enough to ensure stability and security after the battle for control had been won. Neither the Iraqi army nor the Republican Guard was properly disarmed, which is why members of both groups have weapons which they are turning against US soldiers. In mid-November, it was reported that American troops killed three Iraqi civilians at an *arms market*; that such an institution could operate freely under present circumstances suggests an extraordinary lack of perception on the part of the US.

Perhaps the US civil administration's greatest weakness is its apparent lack of sense of direction, and what seems to be the lack of any real expertise among the expatriates who are being employed. For example, I have read several reports on the general topic of 'what should be done'; none of the authors are either country or regional experts. They are worthy people who have worked at putting Bosnia back together again, or in regenerating Kosovo, but they have not had any substantial Middle Eastern experience.

The repressive situation within Iraq over the last thirty years made it impossible to develop a viable opposition to the regime, which meant that opposition forces and groupings had to come together in exile. The US, perforce, relied—far too much, in my opinion—on those who told it what it wanted to hear. Ahmad Chalabi, who had and still has almost no name recognition, let alone popular following, in Iraq, apparently encouraged the US to believe that its soldiers would be 'garlanded with flowers' wherever they went. Chalabi, incidentally, was convicted of embezzling \$300 million from a Jordanian Bank in the late 1970s. He alleges that he was framed by the Jordanian government acting under pressure from Baghdad, but whatever the extent of Chalabi's actual dishonesty, his apparent lack of judgement should surely disqualify his candidature for the leadership of Iraq, a project seeming-

ly high on the agenda of the US government and that of Professor Bernard Lewis. The 84 year old Lewis, whose views are often taken quite seriously in Washington, went on record recently as advocating the restoration of the Iraqi monarchy.

In July, the US created the 25 member Iraqi Governing Council, supposedly the first step towards Iraqis taking over control of their country themselves. While it is not intended to be a democratic body, the IGC is supposed to prepare the country for the transition to self-government. Unfortunately its functions are rather hampered by the failure,

on the part of the CPA and the US' proconsul Mr Bremer, to give even the vaguest indication of a time frame for this handover. As I said, I do not think this handover should take place, for some time, at least as long as the security situation remains as uncertain as it is. To hand over full responsibility for security to the Iraqis with any speed would most likely result in a version of the kind of war-lordism we are familiar with from Afghanistan. Nevertheless, it would be wise to give some indication of the general direction the US envisages things will be moving in, a road map, to use a term devalued from another Middle Eastern context.

Of course, in an ideal world, one country would not send an army of occupation to another, nor would it seek to compensate for its military expenditure by awarding a number of lucrative post-war and reconstruction contracts to its own nationals, in processes which are obviously far from transparent, to say the least. I am highly critical of the incompetence and sheer stupidity of US policy in Iraq. But willing the US not to be there in the first place is to deny reality, however uncomfortable we may be with this. I do not know whether, in the long term, the US will succeed in what it claims to wish to achieve, that is, bringing democracy to

the Middle East. Of course this laudable objective would also signal the end, or the very great modification, of the present regimes in Egypt and Jordan, not to mention those in Saudi Arabia and Syria, or Iran—although there the people may, very painfully, manage that on their own. Arab regimes are almost universally execrated by those who are unfortunate enough to live under them, and they are often still in existence because of the support which they receive from the United States. On the other hand, the construction, or the encouragement, of democracy is not an unworthy aim. The main problem, in Iraq at the moment, is getting it right, and I am not sure how long either the American people or the more long-suffering people of Iraq can put up with the United States' seemingly unending capacity to get it wrong.

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*Peter Sluglett, History Department, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah
E-mail: sluglett@aol.com*