Middle East

Time to act on Iraq

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However caught up we may be with developments in Palestine the situation in Iraq remains a cause for grave concern. It is a situation that requires the formulation of a clear and unified position if life is to return to normal in Iraq and that benighted country become once more an effective member of the Arab fold. The situation is lent greater urgency by the fact that after three months of US-British occupation the country is still in the grips of chaos. In spite of the occupation authorities' promises to get essential services back on the road, to rebuild the agencies and institutions that were destroyed and plundered, lawlessness still prevails, looting continues and a central Iraqi government has yet to emerge.

Escalating attacks against US-British forces have aggravated the deterioration. Some maintain that these attacks are being staged by a national resistance movement intent on expelling the foreign occupiers. Certainly this is what some loyalists to the former regime hope to suggest, as was apparent in the recording of what was purported to be Saddam Hussein's voice calling upon Arabs to support the Iraqi freedom fighters. Such exploitation of events, though, will only exacerbate the plight of the Iraqi people. US-British forces are becoming increasingly nervous and mistrustful, their fingers ever on the trigger for fear of a surprise attack. The syndrome can be seen in the raids on Iraqi homes in search of weapons, during which householders have been subjected to any number of abuses.

Occupation officers and soldiers are unaware of the sensitivities of Iraqi culture. They are unaware of the extent of anger and resentment caused by foreigners invading the sanctity of homes and conducting humiliating body searches. But there is an important distinction to be made between the thirst for revenge that such treatment might trigger and organised national resistance. True, remnants of the former regime are still on the loose and mounting attacks against the occupation forces. Yet I have no doubt that for the vast majority of the Iraqi people the fall of Saddam Hussein came as a great relief.

Well before the war Saddam's regime had demonstrated its willingness to sacrifice the welfare of the people of Iraq to its reckless adventurism, and to squander the resources of the country in one war after the other. The disasters Saddam and his regime visited on Iraq are unpardonable. He sapped a prosperous country of its wealth, drained an ancient, vigorous people of their vitality. He drove millions to seek asylum abroad and buried the cream of Iraqi youth in mass graves for no other offence than their wanting freedom and a better life. Saddam Hussein not only left Iraq ruined and under siege but also ensured that it would become the second Arab nation after Palestine to be occupied by a foreign power and the only nation in the world to be occupied by western powers since the end of World War II.

The pity is that the price of Saddam's departure should be occupation and more destruction. The situation in Iraq today is nothing less than tragic. One need only look at what happened to Iraq's museums, which once housed the treasures that testified to the greatness and splendour of successive Mesopotamian civilisations and which were left exposed to looters and vandals, to realise that a huge conspiracy has been woven against Iraq and its historical legacy and that the Saddam regime lent itself to this conspiracy with the utmost stupidity.

Iraq today is still experiencing the chain of plunder and devastation, which compels us, as Arabs, to act to halt the cycle and help prepare Iraq for independence. The question is how. That the occupation forces must leave as soon as possible, we take for granted. The Iraqi people cannot, and should not, remain under prolonged foreign occupation. However, do we realise this through armed resistance? Or do we begin first by waging a peaceful struggle to rebuild the autonomous capacities of Iraq and its institutions of government and by engaging the UN and the Arab League in this process?

I believe that the Arabs must establish their priorities and work out a collective agenda to help Iraq recover its independence preparatory to its return as an active member of the Arab order. There can be no shirking the historic responsibility that falls on our shoulders. We cannot leave the Iraqi people to continue to suffer the strains of occupation now that they are rid of an oppressive dictatorship. Nor can we allow Iraq to become the fiefdom of foreign intelligence agencies, including Mossad, that seek to sever that country from its Arab context.

It cannot be stressed strongly enough that the current situation cannot accommodate internecine rivalries and the settling of old scores. The position of some Iraqi forces returning from abroad is particularly detrimental to the future of their country. It appears that some representatives of these forces have only one care, which is to hurl accusations at the Arabs. One need only watch the members of the Iraqi National Congress on the TV panel shows in which they are so keen to take part to realise the extent of the rancour and resentment they feel towards the Arabs and their determination to rely on the West, and specifically the occupying powers, to build a new Iraq cut off from its Arab environment!

Such attitudes make it all the more obvious that what is required from Arab governments and people is constructive action towards alleviating the suffering of the Iraqi people and resecuring Iraq's bond with the Arab world. In this regard I believe that Arab civil society organisations can play a vital and more effective role than their governments. The US and Britain are guarding Iraq closely against any outside interference from official quarters, including Arab governments, and they would probably regard the desire of Arab governments to help shape the future of Iraq as an impediment to their own plans for Iraq, its relationship to Washington and London and its relationship to other regional powers, notably Israel.

Arab civil society, however, does not face such constraints. Arab and non-Arab NGOs are already in Iraq providing various forms of humanitarian assistance, and in view of the nature of and the desperate need for this assistance the occupying authorities are hardly in a position to impose restrictions on their activities. The Arab world, and Egypt in particular, have dozens of NGOs and other organs of civil society that can contribute much to the Iraqi people as well as to their Iraqi counterparts such as the various occupational syndicates. Egypt also possesses a wealth of expertise, not only in the fields of medicine, engineering and journalism, but also in the realm of political organisation, which the Iraqi people have not been able to practice freely for decades.

It is of paramount importance during this phase that we establish an Arab presence in Iraq. Only through such a presence will we be able to keep certain regional and international powers from playing on the emotions of large segments of the Iraqi people with the aim of cutting their country off from its natural Arab environment. At the same time, we must bear in mind that the last thing the Iraqi people need is further deterioration in their economic and security conditions. They have suffered more than enough and now is the time to help them rebuild their nation so that they can at last enjoy peace, security and the prosperity that the resources of their country promise them. I, therefore, maintain that the attacks against occupation forces, regardless of their symbolic importance are counterproductive. They set into motion a cycle of violence in which innocent civilians will be the first to suffer and they delay the processes of building new institutions of government and repairing vital infrastructure.

Mohamed Baqer Al-Hakim expressed this point of view succinctly. "Peaceful avenues for dealing with the occupation have not been exhausted. Recourse to force is only an alternative when all peaceful approaches have failed. We must work together peacefully towards ending the occupation," he said. He went on to warn: "There is an attempt to drag Iraq into a vicious and destructive war. Therefore, we must exercise all available means of protest to express our condemnation of all forms of violence and theft as well as negligence of Islamic principles and values perpetrated by the occupation forces." Referring to the attacks against the occupation forces he added, "These operations are being carried out by the remnants of the former regime who are targeting civil institutions in order to disrupt people's lives, destroy Iraq and suggest to the people that the days of Saddam Hussein were better."

In keeping with Al-Hakim's very rational appeal, we should set as our first priority the task of getting government services and utilities repaired and operational in order to improve the humanitarian situation. After this we should move to ensure that a new Iraqi constitution is drawn up, in an Iraqi and Arab hand, and that a new government is formed through free and democratic elections. This, I believe, is the view expressed jointly by Presidents Mubarak and Assad in their meeting in Cairo, during which they emphasised the need for the occupation to end as quickly as possible so that the Iraqi people can resume their responsibilities under the auspices of an Iraqi authority, thereby ensuring that calm is restored, reconstruction continues and Iraq retains its territorial unity.

Osama El-Baz affirmed Egypt's position on this issue when he said: "What is important is to end the occupation of Iraq so that the Iraqi people can begin to assume the responsibility of continuing the process of reconstruction, building institutions of government and drafting a constitution."

On the latter point, I take the opportunity to stress that the task of drawing up a constitution should be left to Iraqi and Arab legal experts. A constitution for Iraq is not the business of some American youth, regardless of his background, for it requires a thorough familiarity with and sensitivity to the various cultural and demographic components that make up Iraqi society. Not only would such knowledge elude a foreigner, matters would be complicated by the religious affiliations of the young American chosen to draft a constitution.