

## America and Arabia after Saddam

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*The Iraq war is only one aspect of a “greater west Asian crisis” that carries the extreme danger of further, terrible violence. In a major essay, Fred Halliday joins knowledge, insight, empathy and anger to assess the current “winners” and “losers” and insist on the central importance of listening to the Iraqi people.*

The images of insensate torture, humiliation and abuse from the prison of Abu Ghraib represent a moment of truth for the world. It is one that, in a sudden, unforgettable shaft of illumination, binds together the reality of what Iraq has become under the hands of its American masters with what it was during the thirty-five long years of dictatorship under Saddam Hussein’s Ba’ath party.

Such a moment calls for both an immediate moral and political accounting of this Iraqi reality, and a larger perspective that attempts a direct understanding and appreciation of what Iraq also represents against the canvas of the larger geopolitical crisis of which it is now inextricably part. These are what I seek to provide.

The Iraqi people had Saddam, and then they had post-Saddam. Both have failed them. It is time to allow them to chart a new course, while indeed there is still time. But if it is to happen, and if the Iraqi people are to secure the justice, freedoms and stability they deserve, this can be guaranteed only by establishing a principle that neither Saddam’s terrible rule nor the

chaos, brutalism and indifference of the occupiers have conceived: listening to the experiences and voices of Iraqi people themselves.

My central focus, then, is Iraq – its people, its recent history, its sufferings and its future. Too much western discussion, in its concern with internal, domestic disputes and agendas, ignores this dimension, and pays scant attention to the 25 million people at the centre of Iraq’s own experience. In the west, the tendency to a self-proclaimed anti-imperialism that fuels a relentlessly moralising posture is too often but the obverse of the arrogance and brutality of the occupying forces themselves.

Yet whatever our analyses and views may be in the west, there is now a vigorous debate taking place in the Arab world, in Iraq in particular, as well as in Iran, about their future. It is one which demands our attention far ahead of the fantasies, tergiversations and half-truths of London, Washington, and Paris.

In Iraq, and more broadly in western Asia – a term I use deliberately – a fire is burning and it is impossible

to know how long it will rage, or who will emerge victorious.

But Iraq is not simply at the centre of that fire. It is at the core – historically, politically, intellectually, culturally – of much of the modern Arab world. Of all the intelligentsias of the Arab world, Iraq's is the most sophisticated, historically conscious and rooted in the real concerns of its society. I can attest from recent conversations that it has survived even the ravages of Ba'athist rule with its pertinent and mordant sense of humour intact. It will, if permitted by foreign occupiers and domestic insurgents alike, play a decisive role in the future of its country.

In 1980, I travelled from London to lecture at Baghdad's college of law and politics (later renamed after the dictator). It was a time of great tension. The previous year Saddam had taken power openly for himself, and had staged a show trial and execution of his supposed opponents – including the popular leader Abd al-Khallaq al-Samarai, who had been imprisoned for several years.

Party members had been dragged screaming from political meetings as Saddam stood, cigar in hand, at the microphone. The top party leadership had been instructed personally to attend and, some report, participate in the executions. All Ba'ath party members had been ordered to watch a video of them, including those students in the UK who were summoned to the embassy in London's South Kensington to watch the appropriate video.

This was all presented by spokesmen for the regime as quite normal, one of whom told me that in a country like Iraq you had to apply *al-qiswa* (harshness), and that the reports of Amnesty International and other bodies about torture and executions were quite true. This was not, in my experience, the standard response in "third world" repressive states.

The Iraqi regime was then at the height of its economic power, after the oil rises of the 1970s, and its social programmes were well advanced. But it was also feeling vulnerable – to the machinations of its Syrian Ba'athist rivals to the west, to the then vocal and insurrectionary Iranian revolutionary mullahs to the east, and even to a possible attack from the Soviet Union.

### A system of violence

In its thirty-five years in power, the Ba'athist regime wrecked the best endowed of all Arab countries. It

killed hundreds of thousands of its own people, Arab and Kurd; deported millions from their homes in forced resettlement programmes; gassed the Kurdish population in the north during the 1980s; destroyed the society of the marsh Arabs in the south; forced millions into exile; and, attacking Iran in 1980 and Kuwait in 1990, plunged the country into two catastrophic wars.

This was in addition to its murdering of opponents and moderate Palestinian leaders abroad; its attempts to undermine rival radical states such as Syria and South Yemen; and the systematic programmes of bribing foreign diplomats, journalists and intellectuals which stretched well into Europe and Latin America, as well as across the Middle East.

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What exactly was this regime? It was clearly rabidly nationalistic, and (through conscious borrowing) fascistic in its rhetoric. Yet its leader also modelled himself explicitly on a communist leader, Joseph Stalin – whose deliberate menace and nuance he copied in his speeches, whose biographies he had studied and whose birthplace in Georgia he secretly visited in the 1970s. Moreover, the unified state-party system he established derived from

a communist model, replete with hierarchies, secretiveness, party privileges; and its political economy was comparable to other oil-producing states (republics as much as monarchies) whose rulers appropriated substantial sums from their peoples yet also used this money for broad welfare policies – hence the now preferred term "distributive state" rather than the older "rentier state".

All this is brilliantly portrayed in *The Republic of Fear*, the classic book by Kanan Makiya. This book, written during the height of Saddam's influence in the 1980s, found it hard to find a publisher in the west or the Middle East alike. When it did so, and like his later *Cruelty and Silence*, the majority of the Arab intelligentsia and their western, supposedly anti-imperialist, collaborators, excoriated it.

At the summit of the Iraqi system of power stood an omnipotent individual, who drove the accumulation of military potential and strategic ambition, but who by that very fact destroyed his country through the fantasies and ignorance that lay at the centre of his thinking.

In addition to the intellectual influences of east and west there was something more direct: foreign political and military support. The Ba'athist regime in Iraq

benefited over many years from the support and indulgence of the west – including Britain, France and the United States. During his time as a student in Cairo in the late 1950s, Saddam was a visitor to the US embassy and received money from them. In the original Ba’athist coup of 1963, when several thousand communists and nationalists were killed in a few days, there was active, close, cooperation between the murderers of the Ba’ath and the US intelligence services.

After the second, decisive, coup of 1968 the Ba’ath depended on the support of the Soviet Union. But following the Iranian revolution of 1979, when the Iranians foolishly and cruelly detained 53 American diplomats as hostages in the Tehran embassy (*jasuskhane* or “spy-house” in their terminology) Iraq re-established closer relations with Washington. The state was, during the eight-year war with Iran that followed its illegal invasion in September 1980, supported and encouraged by the west.

Saddam was not in any simple sense an “agent” or ally of the west, as he had his own nationalist and militaristic agenda, but he benefited in many ways from its support: when he invaded Iran in a clear violation of the UN Charter, western powers helped block action at the UN Security Council and, even when a resolution was adopted, made sure it called for a ceasefire in place, not a return to the original frontiers.

During the Iran-Iraq war, and especially after the Iraqi setbacks of July 1982, many states – Britain, France, the US, as well as the Soviet Union and India – armed, financed and provided intelligence on Iranian forces to the Iraqis. The list of those responsible for keeping Saddam and his regime in power, killing a million Iranians in the process, is long: it includes British politicians (Margaret Thatcher, Michael Heseltine, Kenneth Clarke), French (Francois Mitterrand, Jacques Chirac, Jean-Pierre Chevènement and Claude Cheysson) and American (Ronald Reagan, Robert Dole and Donald Rumsfeld).

Amidst all the debate on the self-righteous Spanish withdrawal from Iraq, the record of Spanish companies and political parties in relation to Saddam in the 1980s and 1990s is worth examining. The same is true, evidently, for many Arab rulers, including the rulers of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait: they were all upset when he invaded Kuwait in 1990 but – as with Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida – they had helped to create and sustain the monster who now leapt at them.

If, then, we ask why we should be concerned about Iraq, and involved in its present and future, here is one

answer: we in the west helped sustain that dictatorship, and we compounded the failure in withholding support from the nationwide popular uprising of Arabs and Kurds, *Sunni* and *Shi’a*, in 1991, in the aftermath of the Kuwait war, as well as several serious coup attempts during the 1990s. In short, we in the west, and in the Arab world and Russia, owe a debt to the people and society of Iraq.

#### A series of earthquakes

The crisis in Iraq, and the broader post-9/11 crisis that surrounds it, will clearly last for many a year yet. It will affect many areas of life – security (interstate, internal and personal), economy (its effects on the world oil market, business confidence and broader macro-economic change), domestic politics, and on inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations in Europe and the Middle East. This combination of impacts across a wide arc of nation-states – the Arab world, Israel, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan – amounts to what I called three years ago the “greater west Asian crisis”.

In short, in the spring of 2004 we are in the midst of one of the greatest, most intractable and *global* crises of modern times. It is not a world war, a strategic military conflict between major states – the form of conflict that, with two world wars and the cold war, dominated the 20th century; nor is it a major international economic crisis, as was 1929 and (less seriously) 1973. But at every level of social and political life, we confront a situation that is likely to affect everyone on earth and have serious global consequences.

At the outer rim of involvement, there is the situation in the developed west. Events of the past two years, more than any since 1945, have divided the countries of the western alliance, their governments and, more importantly, their public opinions. Washington stands alone, with Britain on its side, while on the European continent governments and public opinions are overwhelmingly hostile.

In western Europe, and including large sections of the British public, there is a groundswell of antagonism to the US. At the level of political leadership, it is an open question whether the American president or the British prime minister will survive the pressures on them – let alone salvage for posterity any reasonable political legacy.

In this light, it should be remembered that the Middle East has been the graveyard of many political reputations in the post-1945 period. The Suez adventure in 1956 destroyed the career of Anthony Eden, Winston Churchill’s successor as British prime

minister; the war in Algeria (1954-62) destroyed both the reputation of many French politicians, and eventually the Fourth Republic itself; and Iranian (1979, 1985 -86) humiliations that defined the limits of American presidential power.

The role of Iran and the Persian Gulf region should not be underestimated: the revolution of 1978-79 and the subsequent hostage crisis helped destroy Jimmy Carter in the 1980 election, the Contragate scandal of 1985 -86 dented the reputation of Ronald Reagan and broke several of his subordinates, and the mismatch between his preoccupation with the Kuwait crisis of 1990-91 and his domestic economic failures sealed the fate of the first President George Bush.

These major strategic and psychological setbacks for the United States demonstrated, in ways that should be relevant to present thinking in Washington but appear not to be, that the capacity of American military, political and ideological power to bend others to its will was not absolute.

The geopolitical climate appears very different now. Washington, shorn of the responsibilities of cold war, is not just blissfully ignorant of the fact that both national and global security requires alliances and cooperation with other states: it affects not even to care. "You are either with us, or against us", is the refrain.

The clearest exposition of this line of thinking is the Bush administration's National Security Strategy of September 2002. It argues, in line with what is generally termed "neo-conservative" thinking, explicitly for a doctrine of US superiority and unilateral capability that dispenses with consultation with allies. This is not confined to official statements: a senior European foreign minister who recently met Dick Cheney reported that, in defiance of even minimal diplomatic norms, the vice-president showed absolutely no interest in talking to him.

For Europe, the consequences are very serious. The long-term costs of political division in the European Union – at a moment when ten now querulous new members have joined, with a still undeveloped defence and intelligence policy, and a constitution not yet agreed or applied – could be considerable.

All these difficulties are magnified by the bombings in Madrid. 11 March 2004 has now become the second chapter of 11 September 2001 – an event horrendous in itself, with serious political consequences in Spain, and one that opens the prospect of great uncertainty in

Europe in the coming years: in electoral politics, economic confidence, inter-ethnic relations and (because so many people across Europe as in Spain blame Europe's vulnerability on the United States) in transatlantic relations as well.

9/11 was such a terrible event, even beyond its human cost, because it unsettled so many areas of life. It was an earthquake of the collective psyche, an abrupt end to the period of liberal optimism which for some, and with a certain good reason, had followed the end of the cold war in 1991. Madrid's 11 March reproduces all of this; but, coming at a time of great crisis in the Middle East, the area of the "third world" nearest to Europe, it acquires an added strategic and cultural dimension.

#### Who are the winners?

A key to understanding this broader dimension is to pose the question in blunt terms: one year after the fall of Saddam Hussein, who has "won" and who has "lost"?

#### Iran

There is no doubt as to which country heads the list of those who *think* they have won in the current

climate. This is the country which has had for 3,000 years a hegemonic political and cultural relationship with Iraq; which commands some cultural if not political respect from 60% of the Iraqi population; and which has fought two inter-state wars with Iraq in recent decades – both the devastating 1980 -88 conflict in which it lost a million people, and the less recognised but still decisive border and subversion war of 1969-75.

That country is Iran, whose political and media establishment is highly encouraged by what has happened. The United States has destroyed Iran's arch enemy, while itself doing great damage to its own credibility in the region; Iran's own political allies in Iraq, among Kurds and *Shi'a*, are integrated into the new government structure and have never been stronger; and the country is now poised to play a major, if not decisive, role in the formation of any new Iraqi political and social system.

Iran does not want to see the break-up of Iraq, but it is not unhappy to see the Americans bogged down there for a lengthy period, at considerable cost. It is delighted that, for the first time in the politics of any Arab country, the *Shi'a* community – 10% of all Muslims, but a majority in Iraq (60%) and Iran (80%), has now acquired public, legitimate, internationally recognised status.

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But this Iranian optimism is not entirely wise, for three reasons.

First, although the Iranians like to compare themselves to the Chinese – that other great, 3,000-year post-revolutionary state – there is one great difference between them. The Chinese have, since 1978, embarked on a dynamic economic path, whereas the Iranian economy is mired in inefficiency and corruption, run by an elite of trading *mullah* and *bazaari* elements who exploit oil income for their own purposes, and shackled by substantial un- and under-employment. (Ayatollah Khomeini notoriously said that “economics are for donkeys”, an unwise statement in a country with a population expanding towards 70 million, predominantly young, people).

Second, the Iranians repeat as a mantra that the US can deal only with one crisis at a time: embroiled in Iraq, they will not invade Iran. Indeed they will not – not even Richard Perle or John Bolton advocate that option, despite ritual mutterings about “regime change” in Tehran too.

But the issue of Iran’s nuclear programme will not go away. Bolton recently highlighted Iran’s failure to satisfy International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) rules and warned of the likelihood of this going to the UN Security Council; this process would trigger serious, protracted sanctions on Iran, much more severe than those currently in place for US firms under the 1996 Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA).

More seriously, however, no one should reasonably doubt that, if they wanted to, the US and Israel could launch air strikes against Iran if they identified nuclear targets to hit, on the model of Israel’s destruction of Iraq’s Osirak plant in 1981. Washington ought to be constrained, in dealing with Iran, by the need to keep talking to Tehran over the political futures of Afghanistan and Iraq – for in both countries Iran has a decisive say. But it is unlikely that this prudence will prevail, especially as Israel is now increasingly citing Iran as the source of support – ideological, financial and military – for Hamas.

A third area of concern should equally be a worry to Iran: the relationship between *Sunni* and *Shi’a* Muslims, both in the Arab world and elsewhere, especially Afghanistan and Pakistan. The current Iranian line, emanating from the dominant faction around the *rahbar* (spiritual leader) Ayatollah Khamenei, is that Iraq marks the decisive arrival of the *Shi’a* world onto the broader international stage, after more than two decades of isolation of the one officially *Shi’a* state, Iran itself.

Any such outcome has, however, been preceded by two decades of internecine *Sunni-Shi’a* violence – exemplified in attacks on *Shi’a* and their places of worship in Pakistan; in recurrent, virulent anti-*Shi’a* propaganda by Saudi *ulema*; and, in Afghanistan, the mass killing of *Shi’a* in the 1990s by the Taliban, evidently assisted by their fundamentalist *Sunni* allies in al-Qaida.

A sharp sense of this sectarian antagonism, and of the deployment of ancient myths for modern murderous purposes, can be gleaned in the Taliban’s use of a great Afghan (and Pushtun) hero, Sultan Mahmud Qaznavi (971-1030) – a 10th century commander who was patron of the great scholar al-Biruni, and a scientist and linguist who learnt Sanskrit and translated Indian classics into Arabic. But while cultivating literature and science at his court, Sultan Mahmud also conducted brutal extermination campaigns against *Shi’a*, whom he considered apostates, and against the Hindu population on the plains to the south.

It was the Taliban’s custom, the night before sending fighters into battle against the *Shi’a*, to take them to the tomb of Sultan Mahmud. According to Kate Clark, a BBC correspondent who visited his tomb during the Taliban period, the young *mujahidin* were told that Sultan Mahmud had been killing “communists” – a loose translation of the Koranic term *moshrikin* (polytheists or “sharers”). My local Pashtun grocer told me the other day that Sultan Mahmud had invaded India a hundred times. “Why only a hundred?”, I asked him.

Both Iran and Iraq fuelled this sectarian conflict after the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the Iran-Iraq war that followed. Khomeini denounced Saddam as Yazid, the *Sunni* tyrant who killed the founder of the *Shi’a* belief-system, Hussein; while Saddam called his war Qadissiya, after the battle in which the Arab armies of Islam defeated Zoroastrian Iran – the implication being Khomeini was not really a Muslim. Each side denounced the other for being Israeli agents.

If the Iranian revolution and the wars in Afghanistan in turn heightened the communal tension, the American occupation of Iraq has opened a third chapter. The two modern precedents show that when sectarian and political aspects of the *Sunni-Shi’a* divide come into alignment, the result can be not simply distorting of truth – involving the conventional misuse of text, symbol and tradition – but destructively violent.

At present, in the context of Fallujah and the equalisation of Iraqi experience under occupation, there is much talk of *Sunni-Shi’a* alliances in Iraq. This

may not last, and for their part the Iranians should not be too confident that in this domain things will continue to go their way.

### Turkey

The second country that can, if more quietly, claim to be a beneficiary of the crisis is Turkey.

Turkey matters to Europe, and the world, for several reasons. First, it occupies a position of unique political, cultural and strategic importance between Europe and Asia; more particularly, it links the Balkans, the Black Sea, Transcaucasia and Central Asia to western concerns.

Second, almost a century after the Turkish revolution of 1908, the challenges, goals and hopes of the modernisation project in Turkey continue to shape the aspirations and destiny of west Asia as a whole – even though they are as yet unfulfilled in their country of origin. The convulsive events that followed – the revolutions in Egypt (1952), Iraq (1958), Iran (1979) and, crucially significant for the cold war and the subsequent rise of reactionary Islamism, Afghanistan (1978) – have striven to fulfil the agenda of the 1908 revolution: modernisation of the state, emancipation from foreign domination, secularisation of society and the robust separation of Islam from politics, forging of a new national consciousness, reform of the position of women, modernisation of education and language.

Thus, the Turkish revolution of 1908 remains the benchmark – at once aspiration, model to be rejected and constant implicit critique – for all the radicalisations that followed in western Asia, and those that are yet to come.

Turkey's suspicions of the west are reinforced by memories of what its diplomats refer to as the "Sèvres syndrome", in relation to the 1920 treaty that imposed severe and unworkable conditions on the Ottoman Empire. But Turkey had no love for Saddam Hussein. This was manifest in the crisis over Kuwait in 1990-91, when Turkey supported the US operation in several ways short of direct involvement: allowing the use of its military bases, moving 100,000 Turkish troops to the Iraqi frontier, and cutting the oil export pipeline from Iraq.

There is indeed very little sympathy for the Arab world in Turkey. The disdain can be traced back to perceived Arab betrayal in the first world war, and finds its contemporary manifestation in the consolidation

(since 1996) of an active military relationship with Israel. But Turkey is at least a semi-democracy, and its public opinion – while mainly concerned in recent months with Cyprus and the European Union – is also overwhelmingly against the US intervention in Iraq, not least because it is seen as furthering the agenda of the Kurdish nationalist movement in the northern regions of the country, setting a bad example for the continuously restive Kurds of Turkey itself.

This time, in 2003, Turkey did not allow its bases to be used. But the ostensibly Islamist Justice & Development party (AKP) government, in power since November 2002, responded actively and creatively to the crisis. It took advantage of disarray between the US and its putative European allies by pressing the need for strengthened Turkish relations with these

countries, including closer links to the EU; and by deploying inside Iraq at least 5,000 troops of its own. The latter were used to support the Turcoman community of northern Iraq (variously estimated as between 0.5 million and 3 million) and strengthen its position in the disputed city of Kirkuk, and quietly

build a Turkish-Turcoman security belt between the Kurdish region and the Arab heartland to the south.

Turkey can take heart from the consequences of its decisions over Iraq – even more since the rejection by the Greek population of Cyprus of the UN peace proposal makes the country appear on the international stage as a reasonable, stable, regional actor.

There remains considerable concern, in Turkey and western Europe alike, about the long-term intentions of the Ankara government, how "moderate" its Islamic social programme really is, and which shadowy groups are in reality supporting it. So far, things have gone well: but those of us concerned with the interplay of religion and politics might note that the US ambassador to Ankara recently commented that Washington supports the Turkish government's *rejection* of secularism. The continuing power of the Turkish army which is the institutional bastion of precisely this secularism, makes it difficult to read this statement without a slightly ominous frisson.

### Israel

The third country with a strong claim to be a winner in this crisis is Israel.

Israel has been a strong supporter of a hard line against what it generically calls "terrorism" and against states, such as Iraq and Iran, that appear to support it.

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After the Oslo accords of 1993 there was some optimism that a substantive, just and lasting Arab-Israeli peace could be achieved, and on the basis of what had for decades appeared to any reasonable observer (and to a considerable number of Palestinians and Israelis) as the only basis for a settlement: namely, a two-state solution that involved Israel's retreat to its pre-1967 boundaries, still 70% of historic Palestine, along with compromises over settlements and the "right of return".

In the late 1990s these hopes were dashed, all the more cruelly since, on several occasions, it seemed clear that a political settlement was possible. It was the failure of political leaders and their intellectual and security advisers on both sides that destroyed these possibilities. But the failure was shared by the broader diaspora and inter-state structures into which both Israelis and Palestinians were inserted: Arab nationalist and Muslim leaders, and members of the Jewish community abroad, were equally intransigent and stubborn, while neo-conservatives in Washington were determined to consign the Oslo process to the rubbish bin – along with the ABM treaty, the Kyoto agreement on climate change, and the International Criminal Court.

This was made vividly clear in the tantalising but ultimately abortive non-encounters of mid-2000. Then, Israeli and Palestinian leaders misjudged their opponents, and the broader communities of both sides combined to override reason and the prospect of peace – by urging intransigence in the name of religious and/or national rectitude, and by failing to support, fund and endorse a compromise solution. The blame should be spread widely, and without equivocation, for the disaster is shared. Since 2000, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has escalated to a new level of violence, bitterness and irretrievability. Yasser Arafat and his people have acted with callous disregard for the interests of the Palestinians or their commitments to Israel; while Ariel Sharon, in his blinkered and militaristic initiatives, has acted as the recruiting agent for Hamas and al-Qaida.

If there was a realistic chance for peace in 1967, 1973 and 1993, where is the chance of it now? Whatever ceasefires, truces, peace processes or negotiations take place in the future, are we really condemned to witness a fight to the finish? If so, the human suffering will be great, the international ramifications enormous, the ultimate outcome catastrophic.

The deterioration no longer extends to the Israeli-Palestinian equation alone; rather, after decades of

rhetoric and posturing, the Arab and Muslim world – 1.5 billion people – is now truly, and for the first time, mobilised against Israel and in favour of the destruction of a Jewish state in the Middle East. A hatred that was in the past verbal or formal has started to become real. Far too many young people in the Muslim world now see the destruction of Israel as a desirable goal in a way that was previously not the case.

Israel has military security, but its society is long shorn of its initial Zionist idealism and egalitarianism, and is now a semi-peripheral consumerist community of mid-Atlantic calibre. From all we know and see, the psychological toll on the nerves of Israelis has risen sharply. This is evident in two major processes of considerable import: the flight of tens of billions of Israeli funds from the country to safer markets abroad, and the departure [in Zionist terms, *yorda* (descent) as opposed to *aliya* (ascent)] of a significant proportion of the Israeli population to western countries.

Sharon and his allies may be able to hold power behind their fence, but Israel will be a society increasingly living on its nerves and on medication, losing funds and many of its most talented and independent-minded people. If the current conflict continues, this will become a land without a future, except one that is too menacing to contemplate.

A second point relates to the policy of targeted assassination, part of what is in effect a continuing war. What is often missed in discussion of this matter is the particular significance, and legitimacy, of those Hamas leaders whom the Israelis have recently killed (with no doubt others to come): Sheikh Ahmed Yassin and Abdul-Aziz Rantisi. My personal observation from contemporary encounters in Iran and the Arab world is that the leaders who command particular respect are those – like these – who lead simple lives, are palpably honest in their daily dealings, and who speak in a clear, non-ideological, and often spare voice.

Within the Middle East as a whole, there is a crisis of political legitimacy, after decades of hot air and rhetoric – from nationalists and Marxists, Maoists and Islamists, and now WorldBankists and globalists. On a visit to the tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini in south Tehran in 2000, I was struck by the way people there praised him for being *sade* (pure) and *dorost* (straight) – not like the others. And in the Arabian peninsula, I repeatedly heard praise of political leaders expressed in words like *tamam* (all right) and *mutawadi* (simple) – whether the revolutionary first president of Yemen, Abdullah al-Sallal (whom I interviewed for my PhD) or conservative leaders like

King Faisal of Saudi Arabia; in either case the sense was that they were shorn of corruption, verbiage and vanity.

These were the very qualities of Sheikh Yassin and Abdul-Aziz Rantisi. It is for this, more than their nationalist let alone their religious militancy, that they are respected and will – with as yet unforeseen consequences – be avenged.

#### Who are the losers?

If Iran, Turkey, and Israel are the winners in the present crisis, the losers in all this are if anything even clearer to identify: the Arabs and the Americans.

The Arab world is now divided, between reluctant allies of the US and an enraged population, in a way that was never the case before. A growing sense of militancy has been evident since the late 1990s, one in which the composite issues of Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan and western support for corrupt dictatorships have fused, and in turn been linked to issues beyond the region proper like Afghanistan, to create what I termed in 2001 the “greater west Asian crisis”.

A combination of three elements – popular feeling from below, inter-state manoeuvring and rivalry from above, and the mobilisation by networks like al-Qaida and a genuinely transnational army of *ihadis* – have transformed the regional political and security situation. 9/11 in Manhattan and 11/3 in Madrid reveal that this struggle knows no conventional national or state limits.

Here, the United States has found itself, through the decisions of its leaders, in a monumental trap – and the emphasis felt in Washington on global “credibility” makes it very difficult to imagine an easy exit. Even were fighting in Iraq to cease tomorrow, and the US to withdraw its military forces in the next few months, the combined damage to its reputation from its actions in Iraq and its folly in endorsing Ariel Sharon would continue to cost it and its allies dear.

As things stand, there may be little that George W. Bush or (in the event) John Kerry can do. The United States’s predicament is compounded by the apparent lack of any coherent political control over its Iraq policy: the leadership in Washington is in seclusion or disarray; the political authorities in Baghdad, notably Paul Bremer, are in a bunker; initiative lies with military commanders – Generals Myers, Abuzaid, Kimmitt and in Fallujah (it seems) local marine

officers – who have no sense of political or diplomatic requirements.

Moreover, throughout this crisis the US – true to the unilateralist instincts and policy of the White House – has shown scant regard for the views of any of its allies. The situation is, quite literally, out of control.

#### History as nightmare and resource

Those analysing the Middle East – as much as its residents – love to invoke history, but this is in effect often a disguise for a current interest rather than an innocent exploration of how the past determines the present. In the engagement with this region, I am ever reminded of James Joyce’s observation that “history is a nightmare from which I am trying to escape”.

But beyond the modern history of colonial state formation and later inter-state nationalist rivalry in the Middle East, history does indeed continue to exert its hold on the present, for both its inhabitants and its western interlocutors.

In the case of Iraq, no one can understand the mentality, and appeal, of Saddam Hussein without looking at the society in which he grew up. It is not necessary to

concede much ground to generalisations about the “severe” or “harsh” character of Iraqi society and culture as an explanation for the brutality of the Ba’ath – among the defects of such explanations is their exculpation of the perpetrators of such actions from responsibility for them.

But an essential part of the context of the Ba’ath regime is indeed the history that formed it – the aftermath of the suppression by British forces of the nationalist uprising of 1941 led by Rashid Ali; the mass anti-state mobilisations over Britain’s proposed Portsmouth Treaty in 1948 and again in 1952 (possibly the first time the word *intifada* (uprising) was used in modern Arab politics; growing hostility to the pro-western monarchy in the 1950s; the salience of the Palestine question and, then, the 1958 revolution in Iraq itself.

In this trajectory, nationalist anger at western control, direct and indirect, of their country has been a central feature of Iraqi politics for decades, and for good reason. This is apart from the confected, state-directed use of national heritage by the regime in which all precedents – whether the Kurdish anti-Crusader Saladin, or the tyrants of ancient Mesopotamia, Hammurabi (author of a famously severe penal code)

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and Nebuchadnezzar (conqueror of Jerusalem in 586 BCE) – are recruited to legitimate Saddam’s rule.

On the western side too, history also has its hold. The senior officials now running Washington are far from free of cold war constraints, as they imagine: they are in fact prisoners of them. This is evident above all in two respects.

First, the overall strategic vision of the Vulcans running policy in Washington, far from being some great response to the post-cold war world, is a tired recycling of its themes. What no one has told them, or they have chosen not to see while ensconced in their Washington DC offices, is that the US official view was never an accurate account of how the world worked even during the cold war (as many, including Mary Kaldor, Gabriel Kolko, Daniel Ellsberg and myself tried at the time to argue in our alternative accounts of post-1945 politics); and the world has indeed changed very substantially since 1991, presenting new opportunities and threats alike.

The great beneficiary of the cold war itself, who has proved himself a good student of this change, with a range longer than any of the Vulcans, is Osama bin Laden. In his cave in the Hindu Kush he has a much more perceptive take on international politics than the supposedly visionary occupants of 1800 Pennsylvania Avenue. He also, as we have seen in Spain, understands a lot more about European domestic politics as well.

The Bush administration is a prisoner of the cold war in one respect that goes to the heart of the deceptions over weapons of mass destruction (WMD): namely that, when unable to mobilise support for confrontational actions on more legitimate grounds (like international law or human rights) they resort to a well-worn and little-challenged ploy, “threat inflation”.

During the latter phase of the cold war (1973-83), and before coming to the LSE, I worked as a researcher on international issues for the Washington-based liberal think-tank, the Institute for Policy Studies, originally created by members of John F. Kennedy’s White House staff who had become dissatisfied with his nuclear and Indochina policies. In a debate formed by the Washington consensus, our main job was to provide an alternative analysis of the “Soviet threat”.

This broad challenge was subdivided into three parts: an alternative, critical, analysis of the arms races, nuclear and conventional; an alternative, less alarmist and more historically aware, account of the evolution of Soviet politics and society; and a critical rethinking of the alleged Soviet role in the “third world”, not to

exonerate Moscow from its support for dictatorships and its spurious arguments about a “national democratic” path used to justify this, but to discover whether a closer analysis of what actually happened in countries such as Iran, Afghanistan, Palestine, Ethiopia, Angola, Nicaragua, would reveal the Soviet factor to be much less important than the threat inflators of Washington alleged.

My focus was on the last of these. I soon learned that our work, informed and measured as it was, counted for nothing: the “threat inflators” ploughed on, calling the alarm from Kabul to Beirut, Addis Ababa to Luanda, Managua to the tiny Caribbean island of Grenada. Now, thirty years after those days, the same arguments and the same stage army of inflators – Richard Perle, Frank Gaffney, Donald Rumsfeld himself – are back.

The identical mentality at work across these decades is evident in the arguments made about Iraq’s WMD programmes. Saddam of course talked of a WMD programme, and he had bought (probably at great expense) bits and pieces of it; but he was no engineer, or manager, and his main items had been destroyed, either by Israel in 1981, or the UN in the mid-1990s – and the rest was junk. Washington’s failure is a political one, not, as current investigations seem to think, an institutional or intelligence one – a failure that reproduces the mindset, and the mendacious practices, of the cold war era.

In addition to these historical continuities, there is a further element in the present deep crisis that needs to be registered: the centrality of violence. All societies rest, as Max Weber and Antonio Gramsci insisted, on a core of violence. We who live in Britain have special reason to recall this: this country has over the centuries visited its armies on much of the world, and has been involved in violent conflict in every one of the fifty-four years that the current monarch has ruled.

Yet it is the violence of the rebel rather than of the state that invites particular attention here, in all its stages – the decision to take up arms (often an easier one than that to resist using weapons); the contagious impact of violence on society (particularly young men); the impact of retaliatory state violence; the casualties (physical and mental) of such violence; and the means by which a war once started becomes a way of life for many young people. Violence is a recruiting agent in itself.

In this perspective, it would be better to analyse al-Qaida not (for example) by looking for some elusive “profile” or “terrorist personality”, but via a systematic study of the forms and consequences of violence in modern society. This would open the way to

understand secondary, but not irrelevant questions: the relation of violence to culture and religion, the disposition of some social groups to violence, and how far violence represents either breakdown or continuation of politics.

### Iraqi particulars and universals

Behind the questions of history and violence lies the issue, both ethical and political, that is now at the centre of public controversy: the right to intervene and the critique of western action. Here, focus has been maintained on the question of WMD: as justification for intervention this was both empirically false and in any case highly selective, since if there was one rogue state that was spreading WMD around the region it was not Iraq but America's ally, Pakistan – a country very much part of my Greater West Asian Crisis but conveniently left off the edge of Bush's Greater Middle East Initiative.

The argument has been made that Bush and Blair could have made a much better case for intervention in Iraq on other, legal, grounds – namely Iraq's continued defiance of Security Council resolutions either on weapons inspections (in suspension since 1998) or on more "humanitarian" grounds (regarding Saddam's refusal to implement the provisions over human rights and democracy contained in resolution 688 of 1991).

The reasons why these leaders based their argument on WMD may never be entirely clear, but two suggest themselves: first, the advice of their domestic political advisers (Karen Hughes and Karl Rove in the case of Bush) that public opinion would not support a legal or human rights, only a crude security argument; second, from evidence in the media and from conversations I have recently had with serving British army personnel, the reluctance of the British armed forces at least to engage in a major "do-gooding" operation, after so many inconclusive years in Bosnia, Kosovo, northern Iraq, and Sierra Leone.

These arguments may be in part settled by later documentation, but in any case they seem to suffer from the absence of a concept that is both crucial and undervalued within the debate on intervention and the norms governing it: solidarity.

It is this value which to my mind opens up a different way of looking at the problem of intervention. The question it entails is what are our obligations – as citizens of the world, and (where western countries are

concerned) as part of a democratic, internationalist and privileged society – towards people in other countries.

It was that governing ethic of solidarity that led several of us in Britain – politicians, intellectuals and trade unionists, from Jack Straw, Neil Kinnock, Stan Newens and Ann Clwyd to Eric Hobsbawm and Rodney Hilton – to work through the Committee Against Repression and Dictatorship in Iraq (Cardri) in the 1980s. This was a vehicle through which many in Britain first became interested in Iraq and in expressing solidarity with its people.

This emphasis on solidarity raises two further issues, both analytical and practical, with important consequences for policy. First, it is no secret that modern democracies – particularly those enjoying the comforts of globalisation and the post-cold war world – find it hard to debate, let alone act on, their responsibilities in the field of international peace and security.

The reasons for this are at once varied, inexorable and deeply disturbing. The Rwanda genocide of 1994 was a portent here: "There were no takers for Rwanda" in the memorable words of one UN official.

In the midst of crisis, politicians are reluctant to act, the press is too easily swayed by short-term sensationalist irresponsibility, and professional armed forces are often doubtful about action, especially where it appears guided by humanitarian considerations. Yet if western democracies, including the twenty-five members of the newly-enlarged European Union, do not wish to address the issue of solidarity with suffering elsewhere on the globe, others with less scruple will certainly take advantage. Osama bin Laden is certainly doing so.

A second point arising from a concern with solidarity is the issue of universal values. It is commonly argued in current debates of political and cultural theory that these are of limited salience – that even when people espouse them, their prime loyalty is actually to "their own" specific (cultural, national, "embedded" world). In Michael Walzer's terms, there is a contrast between the "thin" international and the "thick" internal system of value and meaning; similar assumptions underlie the work of Samuel Huntington, Richard Rorty, John Rawls and the "communitarian" school of Amitai Etzioni.

*Behind the questions of history and violence lies the issue, both ethical and political, that is now at the centre of public controversy: the right to intervene and the critique of western action.*

This important debate allows of no easy resolution. But it has very little to do with what is happening, or being debated, in many non-western countries – and it has virtually nothing to tell us about the current conflict in Iraq, and indeed makes very little reference to the extensive literature on the politics of modern Iraq – from Hanna Batatu’s classic study of the 1958 revolution, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, the greatest work of social science on the modern Middle East, to recent studies of *Shi’a* political thinking by Faleh Abd al-Jabar.

What is palpable in such works, as in the reality they depict, is that the supposedly internal and specific “thick” is inextricably bound up with the categories and aspirations of the putatively “thin”. Thus, the Iraqi convulsion is currently raising ideas of nationalism and independence, democracy and equality, federalism and women’s rights, legal process and press freedom – quintessentially “universal” concerns.

I would go further. Even when Islamic terms are used across the Middle East to voice political concerns and aspirations (as in the 1978-79 Islamic revolution in Iran), the main stimulus to action tends to be eminently general, secular ideas like nationalism, democracy, justice, employment, honest government. The ideas may be articulated in language that may seem particular, but their reach and relevance is universal. Here, too, Iraq and its people belong to the same world as the rest of humanity, and solidarity with them is a recognition of this shared reality as well as a moral and political obligation.

#### What should be done?

Against the background of the “greater west Asian crisis”, and with the fires of war blazing in Iraq, it is both difficult and urgently necessary to recommend lines of policy engagement that have a chance of influencing those with power to ameliorate a desperate situation.

In Iraq itself, it is obvious that the United States has, with spectacular mismanagement and blundering, destroyed the goodwill it initially enjoyed when it invaded Iraq in spring 2003. It is in danger of destroying the tolerance of Iraq’s neighbours for its presence in the country. At the same time it has, through its reckless and illegal endorsement of Sharon’s projects, alienated and undermined its allies across the region in a way no previous administration has ever achieved.

The responsibility for all this lies with the Bush administration itself, a coalition of retreads, zealots and incompetents whose errors in this region – as in

the areas of environment, world trade and international law, perhaps also the management of the dollar deficit, will cost the planet dear for many years to come.

Moreover, the United States will itself pay a heavy price for these blunders, and, in the eyes of many across the world, will deserve to do so. Its lack of clear strategy and the absence of any clear line of command in the everyday management of events in Iraq means that it has forfeited any claim to tolerance or understanding there. At the same time, the militant armed groups that have arisen in Iraqi cities have no political strategy of their own, beyond the assertion of armed force; on the basis of all we know (including the balanced assessment of Yahia Said in his [openDemocracy](#) interview), they do not enjoy the support of the majority of the Iraqi people.

In brief, the only possible way out of this crisis lies through a decisive international intervention to secure the foundations of stable and just governance in Iraq, sponsored by the United Nations, backed by Iraq’s neighbours (Arab, Turkish and Iranian), and in cooperation with those Iraqi politicians and technocrats who have the ability and commitment to pursue such a transitional strategy.

At present Washington shows a vestigial willingness to follow this course, but the signals underlying it are not good – from the militaristic bluster of Generals Kimmitt, Abuzaid and Myers to the stalling rhetoric from Colin Powell and George W. Bush himself. Perhaps worst of all, however, is the proposed appointment as US ambassador to Baghdad of John Negroponte – a man without close knowledge of the Middle East despite forty years in the diplomatic service of the United States, who in Central America in the 1980s was notable for his championing of forces responsible for illegal and murderous actions, and who as US ambassador at the United Nations has proved a slavish apologist for Ariel Sharon’s strategic project.

Indeed, it is the UN’s views of the future of Iraq, embodied at present in the figure of Lakhdar Brahimi, a man I have known and admired for over thirty years, that should be heeded, not those of a John Negroponte. There are problems about the UN’s role in the past – the corrupt handling of the oil-for-food programme has left many Iraqis sceptical, and both Kurds and *Shi’a* remember UN indifference to their plight. But Brahimi’s understanding is vital, and is echoed among western states and the Muslim world alike: this international intervention is the last chance to avoid a total conflagration in Iraq and the triumph of the extremists. On current form, it is improbable that Washington will listen.

Will Britain? In regard to Washington's closest collaborator, I would suggest that its leaders should specify the following five conditions for further collaboration with the Coalition Provisional Authority in Baghdad:

- A clear, line-drawing, restatement of the justifications for overthrowing Saddam and remaining in Iraq. Both WMD and the al-Qaida link are discredited, and the resort to international law is so contested as to be unusable. The only case now – and, I would argue, from the start – is one of humanitarian support to the Iraqi people; in a word, solidarity.
- A clear, public and irrevocable guarantee from the Americans as to the integrity and authority of the UN position – what Kofi Annan has called the “central role” of the UN in any political transition after 30 June 2004.
- A clear, public and authorised statement from the White House as to the lines of command in regard to policy on Iraq, both military and political. The confusions, blundering and buck-passing of these months must end.
- A clear, immediate, break with the equivocation and bluff that has so far marked the British and American response to revelations about the torture of Iraqi prisoners, and the detention (in Afghanistan and elsewhere) of thousands of people in undisclosed detention centres. No purely American or British judicial procedure will command credibility: a tribunal must be set up, calmly and with due regard to international law, which will hear the charges and administer justice. Nothing less will do.
- A clear resolution of these issues, and a substantive handover of authority to the UN, must take place before any more British troops

are sent to Iraq. Moreover, active contingency plans should be prepared for the withdrawal of forces from an operation that had the potential to bring great benefit to the people of Iraq, but has been squandered by arrogance, incompetence and lethal bluster.

That is the challenge of this moment of truth in relation to Iraq. Meanwhile, we global citizens who are equally concerned with the issues and principles of public policy have a responsibility to provide what resources we can, however unwelcome or contested they may be:

- A clarification of the analytic and normative, moral and legal issues involved.
- A transparent account of how the past has really (as opposed to mythically) come to shape the present.
- A critique of the illusions and propaganda of those involved, be they states or their opponents.
- An attempt, provisional as it must ever be, to explain what has occurred.
- Not least, the preservation of our own space for free exchange of ideas, without fear of government, threats or calls for boycotts or piety towards any of the parties involved.

Above all, and here I return to the beginning, we must focus our efforts on an interchange with Iraqi citizens, colleagues and friends. For many decades, and including recent months, their views have been ignored. But it is they who will in the end decide the outcome of their current troubles – and in doing so supply a solidarity of their own to those elsewhere who need it most.

*This article is derived from a lecture Fred Halliday gave on “The Middle East after Saddam Hussein” at the London School of Economics, 6 May 2004*

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*Fred Halliday is professor of international relations at the London School of Economics. Among his many books is *Two Hours That Shook the World* (Al-Saqi books, 2001).*

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