

PERSPECTIVE



Iraq War: Not another whitewash please!

By Linda S. Heard

A scheduled independent inquiry into Britain's role in the Iraq War is long overdue. The invasion of Iraq arguably constitutes Britain's greatest blunder since the 1956 Suez Crisis, which resulted in the then Prime Minister Anthony Eden suffering an emotional breakdown and being forced to quit office.

Today, U.S. and British government officials still claim the war had merit in that Saddam Hussein was toppled but in light of the devastation that Iraq has suffered — and is still suffering — such assertions ring hollow. In the past ten days alone over 150 Iraqis have been killed during a series of bomb attacks while up to 200 have been injured. At this point in time when U.S. forces are preparing to withdraw no one can predict the extent of any carnage that may ensue.

Even the most conservative estimates concede that over a million Iraqis have lost their lives due to the invasion and its six-year aftermath. Millions have been robbed of family members, there are untold numbers of orphans, and millions more have been displaced from their homes.

Coalition countries have also paid a price in blood and treasure with the cost of war reaching the \$800 billion mark. Knowing such horrendous statistics make U.S. and British claims that it was all worth it to "free" Iraq from an "evil dictator" sound glib. But what else can they say, when the world knows now that Saddam did not possess weapons of mass destruction and had no links to Al-Qaeda or other groups of a similar ilk?

This disgusting conflict of choice has even broader consequences. The neoconservative dream of pax-Americana is dead. The credibility of the U.S. and Britain has been eroded along with their ability to gain international support in the future for what can be termed "good" conflicts for want of a better word. President Barack Obama knows this only too well and this is one of the main reasons he is reaching out to lapsed friends and foes alike in an attempt to limit the damage caused by his predecessor.

As a fresh — and very likeable — face, the U.S. president is well placed to draw a line on previous mistakes. He was against the invasion from day one and with a failing economy to worry about along with growing tensions with Tehran he is no mood to regurgitate the past.

BRITISH Prime Minister Gordon Brown isn't so lucky. There is little doubt he would like to bury the entire episode as he is in a senior government position throughout and could be implicated if any wrongdoing is brought to light. The fact that, according to colleagues, he expressed doubt about the war early but chose to display his support publicly doesn't bode well for him. But opposition parties and a large swathe of the British public refuse to let him off the hook. Under pressure, Brown has agreed to sanction an inquiry provided the results aren't publicized prior to the next general election.

Brown's decision should be interpreted as good news. But don't hold your breath. Previous inquiries related to the war, in particular the Hutton Report which covered the death of Dr. David Kelly and Lord Butler's verdict on the intelligence used to justify the invasion were both received as establishment "whitewashes." For instance, the latter found that "it would be rash to say now that no evidence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction programs will ever be found." Maybe Butler imagined they were still lurking inside one of Saddam's mattresses.

It has been five years since the Butler Report was issued and evidence has since come to light that Tony Blair knew all along that Saddam was no real threat. Certainly, his famous "45-minute" claim has been ridiculed along with his infamous dossier filched from a student's thesis on the Internet with typos and all. It should be easy to prove that Blair dressed up the truth to sell the war to the British public but his motives for doing so aren't so easily proven. For what it's worth, it is my belief that he simply decided to stand shoulder to shoulder with his best buddy in the White House in true poodle style, irrespective of the rights and wrongs. No wonder George W. Bush gave him a medal! Special relationship or not, for those millions of Britons who flooded the streets to protest Blair's decision was a betrayal.

Word has it that Blair recently sent Gordon Brown the message that he wants the inquiry to be held behind closed doors. Brown would like nothing more but has been forced by shouts of an establishment stitch-up to compromise, promising that some sessions will be open to the public. Other Brown stipulations ensure that the real truth will remain elusive. He says the enquiry will not be mandated to apportion blame or open criminal investigations. He has implied that the investigatory committee will only have access to British citizens and documentation retained by Britain's archives, and will not be allowed "the most sensitive information touching on Britain's security." In other words, nobody is to be held accountable, which means Blair can continue getting a good night's sleep.

However, according to The Mirror, Blair and Brown are being blamed by "army bosses" for the "botched occupation" or Iraq. A 100-page leaked document titled "Stability Operations in Iraq" prepared by former military head honcho Gen. Sir Mike Jackson "attacks Mr. Blair for uncritically accepting flawed U.S. plans for the March 2003 invasion, which led to tens of thousands of deaths, including those of 179 British troops." The report also alleges that Brown blocked vital funding for humanitarian aid, clean water and the reconstruction of Basra, which contributed toward the loss of Iraqi hearts and minds. Shamefully, this military report is destined to remain officially secret.

(Source: Arab News)

Blast kills 33 as Iraq takes charge of security



People gather at the site of a car bomb attack in Kirkuk, Iraq, Tuesday, June 30, 2009.

(AP/Emad Matti)

BAGHDAD (AFP) — Iraqi forces were in control of towns and cities nationwide on Wednesday after the pullout of U.S. troops six years after the invasion, but a bloody car bombing underscored the tough challenge ahead.

U.S. President Barack Obama, who opposed the 2003 war ordered by his predecessor George W. Bush, hailed the U.S. withdrawal as an "important milestone" but warned of difficult days of bloodshed and violence ahead.

The landmark handover was marred on Tuesday by a car bomb attack on a popular market in Kirkuk, an oil hub which has long been riven by ethnic tensions.

Thirty-three people were killed and 92 wounded including women and children, according to local authorities.

"The explosion occurred at a very busy time. I only saw fire and my stall was thrown over. I saw traders on fire in their shops and there were dead and wounded people on the ground," said Aras Omar Ghaffour, a 28-year-old vegetable stallholder.

Iraq marked the American pullback with a national holiday six years after the invasion which toppled Saddam Hussein but sparked an insurgency and sectarian bloodshed that left tens of thousands dead.

Iraq's 500,000 police and 250,000 soldiers are now in charge of security for urban areas while most of the 133,000 U.S. troops remaining in the country will be based outside towns and cities.

The Americans will largely play a training

and support role ahead of a complete pullout ordered by Obama by the end of 2011.

Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki took on critics of Iraq's local security forces, saying they were up to the task of taking over from the Americans.

"It is an offence to the Iraqis. The people who said that the foreign troops would never withdraw and would keep permanent bases in our country were giving a green light to the terrorists to kill civilians," he said.

The U.S. military said four soldiers died from combat-related injuries on Monday, taking to 4,321 the number of American troops killed since the invasion.

"Make no mistake, there will be difficult days ahead. We know that the violence in Iraq will continue; we see that already in the senseless bombing in Kirkuk earlier today," Obama said at the White House.

"This is an important step forward, as a sovereign and united Iraq continues to take control of its own destiny," he said, adding that Iraqi leaders now had to make "hard choices" to resolve political issues and bolster security.

"Today's transition is further proof that those who have tried to pull Iraq into the abyss of disunion and civil war are on the wrong side of history."

Obama has asked Vice President Joe Biden to oversee the U.S. departure from Iraq and Washington's effort to promote internal political reconciliation.

Maliki had warned earlier this month that insurgent groups and militias were likely to

step up attacks in the run-up to June 30 in a bid to undermine confidence in Iraq's own security forces, despite an overall fall in violence.

The deadliest attack this year occurred near Kirkuk on June 20 when 72 people were killed.

U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates said Tuesday he expects "sporadic attacks" as Al-Qaeda fighters "increase the level of violence to try to pretend that they forced U.S. out of the cities" and show weakness in the Iraqi forces.

The top U.S. commander General Ray Odierno told U.S. reporters in a video briefing from Baghdad that he believed Iraq was now better off "not having a dictator such as Saddam Hussein."

"They are now going to be able to see that they can move ahead and the people of Iraq will have a say in their government."

But he declined to say how many U.S. troops would be left in urban centers, saying that figure "will be different every single day," adding that the remaining U.S. troops would be acting as trainers and advisers.

Tuesday's pullback was part of a security agreement signed in November setting the terms for a continued U.S. military presence in Iraq.

The Status of Forces Agreement, which set the pullback deadline, says U.S. commanders must now seek Iraqi permission to conduct operations, but their troops retain a unilateral right to "legitimate self-defense."

Israeli doctors colluding in torture

By Jonathan Cook

NAZARETH (CounterCurrents.org) — Israel's watchdog body on medical ethics has failed to investigate evidence that doctors working in detention facilities are turning a blind eye to cases of torture, according to Israeli human rights groups.

The Israeli Medical Association (IMA) has ignored repeated requests to examine such evidence, the rights groups say, even though it has been presented with examples of Israeli doctors who have broken their legal and ethical duty towards Palestinians in their care.

The accusations will add fuel to a campaign backed by hundreds of doctors from around the world to force Yoram Blachar, who heads the IMA, to step down from his recent appointment as president of the World Medical Association (WMA).

More than 700 doctors have signed a petition arguing that Dr. Blachar has disqualified himself from leadership of the WMA, the profession's governing ethical body, by effectively condoning torture in Israel.

The campaign against Dr. Blachar has gained ground rapidly since his appointment as president in November. Critics said his alleged complicity in the use of torture in Israeli detention facilities can be traced to 1995, when he became chairman of the IMA.

Until 1999, when Israel's Supreme Court restricted torture, Israeli doctors routinely supervised the medical treatment of abused detainees, mostly Palestinians from the occupied territories.

During that period Dr. Blachar surprised many colleagues by expressing support for Israeli interrogators' use of "moderate physical pressure" in a letter to The Lancet, the British medical journal. The phrase covers a wide range of practices from beatings and binding prisoners in painful positions to sleep deprivation. It is regarded by human rights organizations as a euphemism for torture.

Despite the 1999 court ruling, a coalition of 14 Israeli human rights groups known as United Against Torture concluded in its latest annual report in November that Israeli detention facilities are still using torture systematically. Israeli doctors are also being relied on to treat the resulting injuries.

Last week, Physicians for Human Rights and the Public Committee against Torture in Israel published a joint report examining hundreds of arrests in which Palestinians were bound in "distorted and unnatural" ways to inflict "pain and humiliation" amounting to torture.

The report noted instances where prisoners, including a pregnant

woman and a dying man, were shackled while doctors carried out emergency procedures in a hospital.

According to the report, the doctors violated the Tokyo Declaration, the key code of medical ethics adopted by the WMA in 1975 that bans the use of cruel, humiliating or inhuman treatment by physicians.

Ishai Menuchin, the head of the Public Committee, said his group had been lobbying strenuously against Israeli doctors' complicity in torture since it issued a report, Ticking Bombs, in 2007, arguing that torture was routine in Israel.

The Public Committee highlighted the testimonies of nine Palestinians who had been tortured by interrogators. The report also noted that in most cases Israeli physicians treating detainees "return their patients to additional rounds of torture, and remain silent".

In June last year, Physicians for Human Rights drew the IMA's attention to two cases in which the attending doctor failed to report signs of torture on a Palestinian.

Anat Litvin of Physicians for Human Rights told the IMA: "We believe that doctors are used by torturers as a safety net — take them out of the system and torture will be much more difficult to enact."

The groups stepped up their pressure in February, writing to Avinoam Reches, the chairman of the IMA's ethics committee. They demanded that his association investigate six cases of doctors who failed to report signs of torture.

In one case, a prison doctor, under pressure from interrogators, agreed to retract a written recommendation that a detainee be immediately hospitalised for treatment.

Prof Reches promised to conduct an inquiry. However, last month the two human rights groups criticised him for failing to investigate their claims, accusing him of holding only "amicable and unofficial" conversations over the phone with a few of the doctors concerned.

"We have sent to the IMA many testimonies from victims of torture who were referred to doctors for treatment," Dr. Menuchin said. "But the IMA has yet to do anything about it."

"A significant number of doctors in Israel, in detention facilities and public hospitals, know torture is taking place, but choose to avert their gaze."

This month, Defence for Children International issued a report on the torture of Palestinian children, noting that in several of the cases it cited, Israeli doctors had turned a blind eye. A boy of 14 who was beaten repeatedly on a broken arm reported the abuse to a doctor who, he said, replied only: "I had nothing to do with that."



Israel intercepts Free Gaza

Movement's aid ship

GAZA CITY (AP) — The Israeli navy intercepted a ship carrying foreign peace activists trying to break a blockade of Gaza on Tuesday and forced it to sail to an Israeli port, the military said.

A statement said the Greek-registered freighter Arion ignored a radio message from the Israeli military saying it would not be allowed to enter Gaza waters and ordering it to turn back.

The statement said naval personnel boarded the small vessel without any shots being fired.

The military said those on board would be handed over to immigration authorities on arrival in the southern port of Ashdod, and humanitarian cargo would be trucked into the Gaza Strip after a security check. The ship arrived at Ashdod port after nightfall.

An earlier statement by the voyage's organizers, the Free Gaza Movement, said the vessel, renamed the Spirit of Humanity, left the Cypriot port of Larnaca on Monday bound for Gaza with three tons of medical supplies.

The 20 passengers include former U.S. Representative Cynthia McKinney, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Mairead Corrigan Maguire and other activists from Britain, Ireland, Bahrain and Jamaica.

The ship was flying a Greek flag, but no Greek citizens were aboard. The Greek government issued a statement saying it sent a message to Israel demanding that it release the ship, crew and passengers.

Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesman Yigal Palmor said Israel was planning to free the crew and passengers. "Nobody wants to keep them here," he said. "They will be released as soon as they are checked."

The Free Gaza Movement has organized five boat trips to Gaza since August 2008, defying a blockade imposed by Israel when the Islamic resistance movement Hamas took control of the territory in June 2007.

Two other attempts were stopped by Israeli warships during Israel's three-week war in the territory in December and January. Nobody on board was harmed.

Barak: Too early to declare Israel settlement freeze

NEW YORK (Reuters) — Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak said on Tuesday after talks with the U.S. Middle East envoy that it was too soon to say whether Israel would freeze West Bank settlements as demanded by President Barack Obama.

Barak said the talks with envoy George Mitchell, which lasted over four hours, were "positive" but that there are still "differences."

In a joint statement issued after their meeting, Barak and Mitchell said they had discussed the full range of issues related to Middle East peace and security. The statement said the discussions were constructive and would soon continue.

In a rare rift between Israel and the United States, Obama is pushing for a building freeze in a bid to spur the resumption of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

Asked whether Israel would declare a temporary settlement building freeze, Barak said: "I think that it's a little bit too early to predict."