

Immediate U.S. Withdrawal and the Hope for Democracy in Iraq

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THE PEACE MOVEMENT SHOULD call for the immediate, unconditional withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Iraq and the closing of all military bases there: no temporizing, no negotiations, no timetables — just bring the troops home, now. Peace activists should say to the American people that the occupation is part and parcel of an imperial U.S. foreign policy that shores up undemocratic regimes like those of Saudi Arabia and Egypt, gives one-sided support to Israel against the Palestinians, and promotes unjust, inequitable economic policies throughout the world. Not only in Iraq, but throughout the Middle East and globally, U.S. foreign and military policy either directly or indirectly subverts freedom and democracy. The true interests of the American people are not served by this policy.

Some who opposed the war argue now that the United States can't just "cut and run." In response to such arguments, the peace movement can point out that inside Iraq the occupation has caused terrible suffering, including an estimated 100,000 civilian deaths, massive unemployment, corruption and imposed privatization, horrific torture, a continuing infrastructure disaster, and brutal destruction in Fallujah and elsewhere. Moreover, the U.S. military and political presence has not strengthened secular and democratic elements in Iraq; to the contrary, it has served to undermine them. And far from effectively combating terror, U.S. actions in Iraq have only served to recruit more terrorists both inside the country and globally.

The Iraqi people have the right to resist the U.S. occupation, and they should have our support; at the same time the peace movement should give no support to the victory of those elements of the resistance, whether Baathist or theocratic fundamentalist, that are organized to impose an extreme authoritarian regime on the Iraqi people. Such elements, if they came to power, would not open up the road to democracy, social justice or social progress for the people of Iraq: they would simply substitute systematic and brutal domestic repression for U.S. rule. A foretaste of this repression was glimpsed in the terrible March 15, 2005 events in Basra, Iraq, where, as the *Washington Post* reported, "Celia Garabet thought students were roughhousing. Sinan Saeed was sure a fight had erupted. Within a few minutes, on a sunny day at a riverside park, they realized something different was afoot. A group of Shiite Muslim militiamen with rifles, pistols, thick wire cables and sticks had charged into crowds of hundreds at a college picnic. They fired shots, beat students, and hauled some of them away in pickup trucks. The transgressions: men dancing and singing, music playing and couples mixing. . . . 'They focused on the women,' said Saeed's friend, Osama Adnan. 'They were beating them viciously.'" (Anthony Shadid, "Picnic Is No Party In the New Basra: Uproar Over Armed Attack on Student Event Redraws Debate on Islam's Role and Reach," *Washington Post Foreign Service*, 3/29/05)

This is not to say that one should only support "ideal" democratic resistance forces: the victory of even undemocratic forces against imperialism can still serve to open up pathways toward future democratic and radical struggles. However, there is a threshold of authoritarianism and historical momentum beyond which this is not the case: for example, the victory of resistance forces controlled by fascists, Pol Pot, Taliban-like fundamentalists, Stalinists, or unreconstructed Baathists intercepts the normal liberatory dynamic of national movements against imperialism.*

In Iraq, then, the character of the different elements of the resistance matters. Those who say that Western peace activists should support anyone and everyone in the Iraqi resistance, no matter

how capable of and committed to imposing hyperauthoritarian rule they may be ("Anybody But the U.S.") are giving misadvice. This is not a question of the peace movement seeking respectability by pandering to the prejudices of the American people. People in the U.S. are quite rightly horrified by repression and authoritarianism. If we peace activists ever hope to disentangle that horror from the support for imperialism with which it has become entwined, we need to make clear our own deep commitment to democracy and freedom.

Those of us who advocate immediate withdrawal of the United States and its dwindling number of allies from Iraq make a mistake, however, if we try to assure people that withdrawal will necessarily produce a positive outcome. It may be that the grotesque polarization fostered by the U.S. war and occupation has already succeeded in legitimizing and strengthening reactionary elements in the resistance to the point where they will be able to impose their retrograde agenda on the Iraqi people. But one thing is for sure: the longer the U.S. stays in Iraq the less likely a democratic, secular outcome for Iraq becomes. The only hope for democrats in Iraq is a speedy end to the brutal occupation of the country. And the only hope for democrats internationally is to break out of the terrible symbiotic relationship between the U.S. empire and the reactionary forces that feed off of its brutality, by opposing both of them.

MUCH OF THE PEACE MOVEMENT lost precious time and momentum during the presidential election campaign because many peace organizations and activists muted or even dropped their opposition to the U.S. military presence in Iraq. The movement often seemed to blur into a simple "Anybody But Bush" effort that failed to distinguish itself from the pro-occupation policies of John Kerry. Today, polls show that Americans are very uneasy with the ongoing U.S. war in Iraq, but this unease can be turned into effective opposition only if the peace movement clearly makes the case for bringing the troops home now.

Footnotes

*Debating with Stephen Shalom and me at the April 16th session of the 2005 Left Forum in Manhattan, Tariq Ali invoked the traditional socialist defense of Ethiopia under Haile Selassie against Italian imperialism in the 1930s to justify support for Baathists and extreme theocrats against the United States in Iraq today. Significantly, Ali described Haile Selassie as a backward dictator. But that is precisely the point: Selassie was a backward and outmoded dictator whose historical moment was passing: dictatorships like Saddam Hussein's and those that would result from the victory of political ultrafundamentalists in Iraq are unfortunately very modern, possessing contemporary methods of repression and control, and part of an increasingly powerful and widespread reactionary response to the depredations of Western imperialism. They represent a very real option in the world today.