

The End of Saddam Hussein: History Through the Eyes of the Victims.

by Prem Shankar Jha. 2004. Rupa & Co., New Delhi.

Events in Iraq in the last decade, especially the invasion of Iraq by the United States and its allies (the so-called Coalition of the Willing) in 2003, have shaken the basis of the international system which has governed interstate relations since the end of the Second World War in 1945. In the Middle East, the lack of faith in the multilateral institutions set up after that War, has intensified. Bombing of the United Nations office in Baghdad last summer and threats to other international institutions, have forced the closure of the United Nations office and withdrawal of even the Red Cross from Iraq. At this juncture, Mr. Prem Shankar Jha has made a signal contribution by analyzing the events in Iraq, the process of decision-making at the United Nations, and the relentless pressure exerted on the United Nations' machinery by the unilateralist policymakers in Washington. Mr. Jha has intimate knowledge of how the international print and electronic media operate. His analysis of their role before and during the war should, at the least, induce introspection among its practitioners. It is imperative that the issues highlighted by him are debated widely in order to restore integrity of the United Nations and credibility of its approach and decisions.

Saddam Hussein

While recounting events in Iraq, Mr. Jha draws attention to Saddam Hussein's association with the United States Central Intelligence Agency in the late 1950s. This was not exceptional. Britain, France and the United States had been active in shaping the political landscape of the Middle East even before the break-up of the Ottoman Empire. The British were responsible for placing the Hashemites on the throne in Baghdad and in Amman. The British and the Americans played a crucial role in the ordering of political landscape in the Arabian Peninsula. The Central Intelligence Agency masterminded the coup which restored the Shah of Iran to the throne in the nineteen fifties.

In Iraq, Brigadier Abdul Karim Qasim assisted by Colonel Abd as-Salam Arif overthrew the monarchy in Iraq in 1958. Whereas Arif advocated Pan-Arab cause and wanted Iraq's union with the United Arab Republic (of Egypt and Syria), Qasim favoured Iraqi nationalism and identity and obtained support of the Iraqi Kurds and the Iraqi Communists who did not favour union. He also secured the support of the Soviet Union, which had come to his aid when the United States and Britain made threatening moves after the overthrow of the monarchy. Arif went into exile in Egypt.

Qasim's policies did not suit the United States nor did they suit the Pan Arab Baa'th Party. Saddam Hussein, a Baa'thist, collaborated with the United States in order to overthrow Qasim. When his attempt to assassinate Qasim failed, he escaped to Egypt with the help of the United States' and Egyptian intelligence agencies. In February 1963, a section of the Iraqi Army with Baa'thist leanings rebelled, overthrew the regime and executed Qasim. Both Arif and Saddam Hussein returned from exile in Egypt. When the Baa'thists assumed total power in 1968, the Communists suffered persecution in their hands. On taking over the Presidency of Iraq in 1978, Saddam Hussein outlawed the Iraqi Communist Party. This did not prevent him from maintaining close relations with the Soviet Union, which was the main source of arms and equipment the Iraqi Armed Forces. While maintaining links with the United States, the Iraqi regime continued support to Arab nationalism as manifested in the Palestinian struggle for justice, which went against the interests of Israel, whose security was a prime interest of the United States.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1978 and overthrow of the monarchy in Iran by the fiercely anti-United States Shia clergy in 1979, administered a sharp setback to the United States' dominance of the Persian Gulf region, which was the main source of oil for Western economies. The new rulers of Iran proclaimed their desire to export their brand of militant Islam and overthrow the traditional conservative Arab monarchies on the other side of the Persian Gulf. This was an opportunity for Saddam Hussein to assume the leadership of the Arab states, a position Egypt had lost (temporarily) as a result of concluding a separate peace with Israel at Camp David. He denounced the border treaty with Iran he had signed in 1978, and initiated a war with Iran which lasted until 1988 and left both countries exhausted and impoverished. The United States provided material

assistance (including materiel for weapons of mass destruction) to Iraq during the conflict. The Arab states bordering on the Gulf readily provided financial support.

By the time the war with Iran ended, the situation had changed radically. The Cold War was ending and the Soviet Union was unknowingly retreating into oblivion. The first flush of radicalism had subsided in Iran and it was ready to make peace with its neighbours. However, Saddam Hussein did not seem to realize the import of changes – that his conservative, weak but rich Arab neighbours (who traditionally relied on the United States and Britain for security in return for guaranteeing their oil interests in the region) saw a weakened but still powerful Iraq as the main danger now. His support to the Palestinians made him a threat to Israel, which was linked indissolubly to the United States. When Kuwait refused to cooperate in mitigating the economic hardship faced by Iraq as a result of war with Iran, he swiftly occupied Kuwait in August 1990 and moved his troops to the border with Saudi Arabia.

Iraq's annexation of Kuwait was universally condemned. For the second time in its history, the United Nations authorized military action to redress the situation. After Kuwait had been liberated, the United Nations Security Council continued mandatory economic sanctions imposed earlier until Iraq had been disarmed, and its potential to manufacture and deliver weapons of mass destruction eliminated.

Defeat did not end Saddam Hussein's defiance. He insisted on respect for Iraq's sovereignty in the face of intrusive and peremptory inspection by the United Nations' inspectors. His case was weakened by the defection of his sons-in-law, who provided evidence of Iraq's efforts to conceal existence of prohibited weapons from the inspectors. However, by 1998, it became obvious that Iraq had little or no capability to manufacture weapons of mass destruction or deliver them. Despite this, the United States would not allow the inspection teams to say so. The refusal of Iraq to permit the teams to continue to operate and provide intelligence to the United States became a pretext for massive bombing of Iraqi territory in 1998. The United States wanted overthrow of Saddam Hussein by any means. Dual containment of Iran and Iraq had become the primary goal of the United States' policy in the region in 1993.

In addition to economic sanctions, the United States and Britain were able to obtain United Nations' acquiescence, if not specific approval, to declaration of 'no-fly zones' in Iraq. These were territories inhabited by the Kurdish minority in the north and Shia inhabited areas in the south. This was done ostensibly to prevent violation of human rights of the Kurds and Shias by the Iraqi forces. In reality, the no-fly zones gave free rein to the Anglo-Americans to degrade Iraqi defences.

By 1998, the sanctions had caused tremendous hardship and privation to the people of Iraq and aroused Arab and international concern. International opinion swung towards easing of sanctions. Efforts were also underway to seek reconciliation between Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Arab attention was once again focussed on the plight of the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. Despite hardship faced by the people of Iraq, Saddam Hussein had continued to support their resistance to Israeli occupation. It was obvious that the containment policy was failing. Other means were needed to remove Saddam Hussein from power.

With the election of George W Bush as the President of the United States in 2001, this became the immediate goal of his administration. Undeterred by failure to obtain United Nations' endorsement, the United States and a few other states fashioned a 'Coalition of the Willing' to attack and occupy Iraq in the spring of 2003. The pretext of removal of weapons of mass destruction from Iraqi hands was just that – a pretext. During the nine months of occupation so far, no such weapons have been found. It is conceded none might be found.

The capture of Saddam Hussein in December 2003 marked the end of an era in Arab politics – the era of secular Arab nationalism. Its other votary, President Arafat, is confined to the ruins of his office in Ramallah. Colonel Gaddafi, the President of Libya, has found it expedient to shed his ambitions and come to terms with the United States and Britain.

The United Nations and the United States

Mr. Jha's concerns go beyond the future of Iraq. He is troubled by the erosion, which has occurred in the political values traditionally espoused by the United States. Creation of the United Nations Organisation in 1945 was an American project. It was designed to prevent all those arrangements (e.g., military alliances, balance of power) which led to war. Then, the

United States had even expressed willingness to impose restraint on its own actions in order to strengthen the peace-keeping ability of the United Nations. Postwar differences and divergences made this unrealisable. The end of the Cold War gave another opportunity to realise the benefits of collective action to maintain peace. Dr. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, first post-Cold War Secretary-General of the United Nations, sought a meaningful role for the Organisation and came to grief – the United States used all its diplomatic resources to prevent customary reelection to a second term for him.

In his memoir, Dr. Ghali describes a luncheon meeting on February 1, 1993, with Warren Christopher and Madeleine Albright, newly appointed Secretary of State and Ambassador to the United Nations respectively of the just inaugurated Clinton Administration. He writes:

“... I know that I must have US support if I am to succeed. I will always seek and try to deserve that support.” But, I said, ‘please allow me from time to time to differ publicly from US policy. This would help the UN reinforce its own personality and maintain its integrity. It would help dispel the image among many member states that the UN is just the tool of the US.’ To do so, I said, ‘would also be in the interest of the US. It would give the US more options in its foreign policy if on some occasions it were able to use the UN credibly.’...

“My words appeared to shock them. Christopher and Albright looked at each other as though the fish I had served was rotten.”¹

The United States was no longer prepared to give a central role in peacekeeping to the Organisation, which it had come to generally distrust. It used the Organisation when it suited its purpose. In the Balkans, the United States turned to the European Union and then to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), for resolving the ethnic divisions. The United Nations had a minimal role in either negotiating the peace settlement or enforcing it. In Afghanistan, the United States assisted by NATO, took over the peacekeeping operations. It detained the alleged members of terrorist organizations captured in Afghanistan under conditions which denied the detainees the benefit of international conventions and even its own laws.

Mr. Jha records, in detail, deliberations of the United Nations Security Council in the six months preceding invasion of Iraq and deliberate decision

of the United States and Britain, two of the five permanent members of the Council entrusted with the responsibility to maintain peace, to flout the wishes of the majority of the Council. What caused this?

He draws attention to the rise of 'neo-conservatives' in the policy-making organs of the United States. As early as 1992, they proposed that the United States "prevent any hostile power from dominating a region whose resources would, under consolidated control, be sufficient to generate global power. These regions include Western Europe, East Asia, the territory of the former Soviet Union, and Southwest Asia." The authors went on to consider situation in Iraq and in North Korea and suggested that "if necessary, the United States must be prepared to take unilateral action." In their opinion, "the United States should be postured to act independently when collective action cannot be orchestrated" (pages 74-5). With the inauguration of George W Bush as President in 2001, they came to occupy key positions in his administration. The terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington in September 2001 created a political environment and public response conducive to not just pre-emptive action. A preventive response became an equally acceptable alternative.

Media

How does one restrain the United States? Mr. Jha examines at length the role of the media in what he rightly calls 'Manufacturing Consent' and then its unravelling after the deed (occupation of Iraq) was done. He states:

Since the media are the indispensable tools of propaganda, inevitably a large part of any war effort has come to revolve around co-opting them to spread the message of self-righteousness...If the state needs the media to spread its message, the state is constrained from acting in ways that it cannot easily explain to the media, and through it to the public. This has led to a constant tussle between the state and media, and an uneasy equilibrium in which each is constantly on the lookout for new techniques by which to gain an ascendancy over the other....

He concedes:

The story of Iraq...shows the extent to which the state has been able to use its immense powers of patronage to influence the message that the media sends out and to silence its doubting voices. (page xii)

There ought to be other ways to restrain a global power from acting unilaterally.

Mr. Jha has made a compelling case for the opinion-makers to study and respond. His book invites a re-read.

S.K. Bhutani

New Delhi

Reference

- 1 Boutros-Ghali, Boutros, *Unvanquished: A US-UN Saga*. 1999. I.B. Tauris; London, New York. p.198.

