

IRAQ AND THE RETURN OF COLONIALISM

By Burhan Ghalioun

The failure to discover any traceable evidence of Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq doubtlessly creates a serious embarrassment for the American administration. But the US never made much of an effort to conceal that the purported existence of WMDs in Iraq was only a pretext employed to obtain the consent of some of its bigger allies to its global strategic outlook, and the acquiescence of smaller nations to its regional plans. The real objective behind the US strike against Iraq was not the destruction of WMDs – Iraq in its pre-war state was ill equipped to produce WMDs anyway – but to topple the regime of President Saddam Hussein. The Bush administration also clearly considered regime change to be more than a strategic aim in itself, but rather a prelude to a general makeover of the region, in the course of which many local regimes would have to change or be changed according to its strategic vision. Secretary of State Colin Powell made this abundantly clear when, in December 2002, he promised the peoples of the region a concerted effort on behalf of the US to achieve democratic change, fight unemployment and work for the improvement of women's position in society.

Powell's initiative revealed the intellectual background driving American policy in Iraq and the region as a whole – an approach born out of the Bush team's conviction that the hegemonic social forces in the Arab world, including those counted as pro-American, have failed to lead and promote the economic, political, cultural and religious affairs of the region. In this view, the ruling Arab regimes are in the final analysis responsible for the disturbances and tensions that prompted the growth of fundamentalist and terrorist organizations which today threaten the West.

We have to concede that the US did succeed, in spite of the blatant inconsistencies that mark its publicly advocated positions, and despite the resistance of the United Nations, to realize two important objectives in its pursuit to impose its regional schemes onto Arab regimes. First, they successfully bullied a good number of governments throughout the region into supporting or at least acquiescing to the American war plan. The permanent pressure exerted in the months leading to war convinced many governments that war was inevitable, and that it would be better to be on the winning side rather than to oppose the US or remain neutral, and risk becoming a potential next target. Hence, many Arab regimes scrambled to provide their support for the US, thereby wiggling out of formal obligations undertaken in the frame of the Arab league, such as the pledge not to cooperate with any attack on Iraq that was ratified unanimously during the Beirut summit in March 2002. Rather than criticize the American administration, many regimes shifted to a position of openly welcoming cooperation, providing assistance and actively implementing the reforms expected from them. The American administration in turn has displayed remarkable flexibility in its dealings with the various Arab regimes, and did not impose specific approaches on any of them in terms of how to perform their obligations towards Washington. On the contrary, the US was careful not to overstate the support and cooperation it received in ways that could potentially compromise the credibility of the country or regime providing it, and accepted from each and every government what it could provide without causing too much embarrassment.

Thus much of Arab-American relations returned to their original course, and many Arab regimes dropped the apprehension and fear they felt for their fate and future in the face of an American policy of military pressure seen as no longer respecting even the basic forms of international relations. With this flexibility, the Americans managed to neutralize most of the Arab world and secure the active cooperation of a



sizeable minority of Arab states. This cooperation was a necessary condition for the success of the American strategy, providing it with a reliable regional base for intervention, and enabling it to operate and change the balance of power from within the theater of operations itself. The neutralization of the Arab League also freed the hands of the Arab governments who were ready to cooperate, and protected them in the face of any potential local opposition and resistance.

The second objective that the American administration achieved through its current strategic assault was to convince the Arabs themselves and most of the rest of the world, both on popular and official levels, that the American vision for change is the only viable option for the region, and that there is no real potential or horizon for economic and democratic change coming from within these societies.

The way the Arab regimes caved in when faced with the assault on Iraq served to support this view, very much like the nearly complete failure of the same regimes to stand up to the Palestinian crisis a year before, and like their inability to implement any serious program of economic, political or social reform, while the regimes in power are increasingly closing in on themselves, marginalizing their public, and monopolizing their grip on power. Faced with such a blind pursuit of power and open disdain for any requests for reform in the face of a deteriorating social and economic situation, there is a growing sense in the larger part of global public opinion that maybe there is no alternative to foreign intervention in the Arab region, even if and when it happens in blatant contradiction to all accepted standards and principles and lacks any kind of legal cover.

More than that, a good part of Arab public opinion has despaired of the local elites and lost any trust in them. Namely the middle classes that find themselves threatened by a steep decline without any hope for improvement, participation and reform, are sliding slowly but surely toward the same conviction, and are ready to jump from the frying pan of oppression into the fire of foreign intervention. After giving up on any internal improvements, they now hope for an impact from the outside that may break the ice of the status quo. They are encouraged in their expectations by the behavior of their leaders themselves who, when faced with a new crisis ravaging the area, beg the big countries for intervention, and appeal to them for help on many other accounts. All of this serves to convince the public that these regimes have long lost control over the situation, and that the solution of all external and internal problems is now really in the hands of foreign states and powers.

The fears that the American onslaught has caused in the Islamic sectors of public opinion will not serve to stem this collective withdrawal from the Arab nation, with all that this entails in terms of surrendering national sovereignty. Likewise, the cheap and hypocritical discourse of patriotism employed by the regimes with the overt aim of subduing public opinion and quelling any critical and reformist discourse will not stand in the way of this current, but rather tends to enhance it.

One thing seems certain: If we – governments and opposition forces alike – are not able to move forward, say within the horizon of a year, towards an understanding that opens a perspective for real change and reform in the region, and show our public opinion a way out of the doldrums of frustration and defeatism, then we should not be surprised to see the final collapse of the last inhibitions that may still prevent large parts of Arab public opinion, steeped as they are in the spirit of nationalism, to throw in their lot with foreign intervention, be it European or American.

Because if the current crisis and disarray persist, our societies will not only lose trust in the ruling elites, but also in the local national opposition, and eventually in their ability to deal with their own affairs, thus

preparing the ground for an unconditional capitulation and a welcome to foreign intervention and solutions. What is happening in Iraq today is not an Iraqi issue alone. In the absence of any real solutions for the problems of our societies, and with the persistent unresponsiveness of the ruling elites towards any pleading for economic, political and social reforms, there is not much that would prevent any society, Arab or other, to go down that same dangerous road. One faction will be ready to strike a deal with the devil to get rid of tyranny and oppression, while a silenced and submissive majority that long retreated from politics and anything related to the public domain looks on with indifference and scorn.

To be sure, the American neocolonialist advance into the region will not offer the local elites clinging to their coattails anything but humiliation. It will also not help those regimes that in a desperate effort to avoid becoming its victims subscribe to the American strategy. Nor will it improve the situation of the declining middle class, or lead to an era of stability and prosperity as some still expect – far from it. Rather, it rings in a long era of disappointment, a new decade of instability or even chaos, while security and peace seem as elusive as ever.

First published in Fasl Al-Maqal ("The Decisive Word"), Nazareth/Jerusalem, February 2, 2003. Translated from Arabic by Heiko Wimmen, Beirut/New York.

Burhan Ghalioun is presently the Director of the Centre d'Etudes sur l'Orient Contemporain (CEOC) in Paris and a Professor of Political Sociology at the Université de Paris III (Sorbonne Nouvelle). He obtained his Ph.D. in Political Science from the Sorbonne. He is the author of several authoritative books, such as *Le Malaise Arabe: l'Etat contre la Nation*, *Islam et Politique: la Modernité Trahie*, *Crise de la Politique: l'Etat et la Religion* and *La Culture Arabe: Entre Modernisme et Traditionalisme*, as well as over a hundred academic articles in various journals on political Islam, Arab political culture and state and society relations in the Arab World.