

FINANCIAL REVIEW**Hope begins to silence critics of the Iraq War**

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Two years ago America, Britain, Australia and their allies sent to Iraq troops that removed Saddam Hussein and his ruling Ba'ath party. This was the most significant event in Iraq since the establishment of the republic in 1958.

Although international, these troops were deployed without international consensus, and although no weapons of mass destruction turned up in Iraq, it remains a fact that the removal of Hussein could not have been achieved if America and its allies had not gone to war against that tyrant. Despite the sad death toll from subsequent bombings and assassinations, there is now at least tangible hope for a better future for Iraq, which Iraqis had not dared to dream of under Saddam.

Pointing out the sensible, preliminary steps being achieved on the road to a bright future for this great country should no longer be considered over-optimistic.

The January election in Iraq will go down in history as a landmark despite violence, abstentions, numerous protests, some flaws, and despite the sad and unforgivable loss in human lives.

Critics of the Iraq War seem quite satisfied, even delighted, every time they remind the world that American and allied troops came to Iraq two years ago without international consensus and that no weapons of mass destruction were found there. The majority of these critics had been notoriously silent about or unaware of the long suffering of Iraqis under Hussein. Adding insult to injury, they refuse to acknowledge the determination of the Iraqi people to seize the unique opportunity of Hussein's removal for building a new Iraq.

Critics of the war seem keen to interpret negatively any positive indicators coming from Iraq. They do not want to know about the increasing number of countries that have re-established their embassies in Baghdad, the thousands of schools that have been rebuilt and the hundreds of ongoing projects for the construction of hospitals, new schools, houses and infrastructure.

Critics of the war do not care if more than 60 higher education institutions are operating successfully despite very limited resources. Nor are these critics interested in the freedom of a booming media that includes 180 newspapers, 70 radio stations and 10 TV stations. Not even the disappearance of Hussein's censorship merits the attention of critics of the war.

While rebuilding Iraq, Iraqis must remember, and remind the world, that their country had been kidnapped for 35 years. As soon as they started ruling Iraq, Hussein's Ba'athists began a concerted, ruthless, methodical process aimed at destroying the very structure of Iraqi society. They had planned to govern a broken society by terror. High on their hit list was the complete dismantling of whatever harmony still extant among the various components of society. World media were hardly aware of these events when they occurred; and if some were, they did not make as loud a noise about them as they now make about America's presence in Iraq.

An angry and frustrated nation was left to remain penned up for 35 years by Hussein and his Ba'ath party under the silent gaze of the world and its media. In April 2003, Hussein was finally removed for whatever reason, motive or pretext; and good riddance. When Iraqi anger and frustration finally had their chance to explode, the only authority they found in charge was a foreign occupation army. Many people naturally vented off against America, Australia, Britain and their allies because the Ba'ath party was no longer there to receive well-earned hatred from the nation it had oppressed for three decades.

Violence should not be expected to stop soon because neither the nascent democracy nor the restructuring political system is equipped to absorb or even handle the Iraqi volcano that is still erupting in stages since April 2003. Violence at present is multi-faceted and can be attributed to any combination of the following factors: anti-Hussein / anti-Ba'ath sentiments; sectarian, religious, tribal, and ethnic grudges; anti-occupation sentiment; manipulation from neighbouring countries; vulnerability of the poor and the unemployed; remnants of Hussein's various security apparatuses who may be now funded by his family and friends; and common criminals. Some simple people may now act like bandits because they had been compelled by Ba'athist propaganda to look up to a role model, Hussein, who fleeced the country, robbed everybody, inflicted harm and got away with it. They may be emulating him now. While some of the violence in Iraq is directed at occupation troops, most of it is the aftermath of one of the world's most ruthless dictatorships.

However, despite ongoing violence, no camps have been established in neighbouring countries to receive refugees fleeing Iraq in the 22 months since Hussein's overthrow. Despite what the media show and tell us daily, there has been no exodus from Iraq. True, there are some people still leaving Iraq, but their numbers are nothing compared with the hundreds of thousands who fled from the terror and each new adventure of Hussein's. In the 22 months since April 2003 there has been no news of Iraqi asylum seekers, boat people or other refugees. Whenever Iraqis abroad call their relatives in Iraq to inquire about their safety, the answer is: the media exaggerate the events happening around us. We

are managing well without Saddam.

Before the first revolution in 1958, Iraq's diverse ethnicities, religions, tribes and sects used to interact almost harmoniously when extra-social influence did not meddle in their affairs. Tensions existed but they were generally not lethal, instead fluctuating according to period and ruler. Only when compelled to be politicised by the dictates of intimidation did the cohesive mosaic of Iraqi society crack. Hussein's Ba'ath party was master in sowing antagonism in each group against the other, a mission easily achieved in its police state. It also succeeded in sowing resentment against foreigners, who used to be better tolerated before 1968, when Saddam himself came to power.

During the 1950s, Iraqi society accepted the existing secularism of the state. There was no objection to that from Shiites, Sunnis, Christians, Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians or Chaldeans. There was severe criticism of government policies, there were dissenters, demonstrations and protests; but the secularity of the state was never challenged. Article 13 of Iraq's 1925 constitution, which was annulled by the revolution of 1958, states: Islam is the official religion of the state. This statement was present in that constitution throughout the 37 years of monarchical rule. However, it did not cause sectarian, religious or ethnic strife. If incorporated in the coming constitution, a similar statement should not raise any apprehension. During the 1950s, religion did not care to mix with politics as Iraq was intent on constructing its infrastructure while society was relatively stable. The boom that Iraq witnessed in the 1950s was bigger than the one that followed the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. A strong economy that will employ all Iraqis in a free environment would be the best insurance towards moving religion away from politics.

Rebuilding the Iraqi economy, society and political structures should take priority over rhetoric of sovereignty, picking on foreign powers and ousting their troops. Iraq's sovereignty between 1958 and 2003 contributed nothing to the freedom, human rights and wellbeing of Iraqi people, nor did it prevent ruling army officers, party leaders, dictators and security officers from oppressing the people despite a plethora of hot rhetoric about sovereignty.
