

## **Seeking Security**

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America's failure to provide basic protection is provoking demonstrations and seeding distrust.

The three-week occupation of Iraq by American and British troops has raised real questions - and, for Iraqis, real fears - about the political democracy, moral stability and prosperity the Iraqi people were promised after their liberation from Saddam Hussein.

Seen from the Arab world, the occupiers themselves seem to be in chaos; the "stabilizers" appear in need of stabilizing. Rather than seek to determine the political direction of Iraq, Arabs say, the Americans should fulfil their international obligation to protect Iraqi civilians and create a benign environment in which democracy can flourish.

The widespread looting and burning that afflicted Baghdad, Kirkuk, Mosul, Basra and other cities immediately after coalition forces entered them were not the only evidence of disorder seen in the first days of pax Americana. Self-appointed civil administrators emerged in almost all Iraq's main cities - sometimes backed by Americans, sometimes even without their knowledge - and large numbers of armed groups took to the streets with their guns to defend their homes and families under the eyes of American troops.

With no authorities yet in place to enforce law and order, and scant intervention by US troops, there is growing concern that these armed groups will either coalesce into permanent militias or, worse, become guns for hire for anyone who has a score to settle in the post-Saddam period.

Whether returning from exile to declare themselves as governors - like Mohammed al-Zubeidi in Baghdad and Misha'an al-Juburi in Mosul - or emerging from the slums and using their weapons to avenge past injustice, these new players on the Iraqi scene are seen by Arabs, and Iraqis in particular, as warlords at a time when the war has ended. They may not be made in the USA, but the fact that they are acting side by side with US marines and tanks has conveyed the impression that they are.

Worse, in the Arab view: the very Americans meant to be imposing order have themselves participated in the free-for-all. They have stolen oil paintings, valuable stones and documents from Baghdad's cultural institutions and, according to the Central Command in Qatar, made off with approximately a million dollars in cash.

Addressing a three-day conference that grouped 350 representatives of political parties and non-governmental organisations in Beirut last week, former Lebanese Prime Minister Selim al-Hoss said the United States' failure to meet an occupying force's obligation to protect civilians was a "new violation" of human rights and as much to be condemned as America's "unilateral aggression" against Iraq. The conference ended with a call on the Iraqi people to resist the "aggressors" and a demand for the immediate withdrawal of all foreign troops from Iraq.

Growing anger over what is seen as American disregard for ordinary Iraqis exploded onto the streets at the weekend after an ammunition dump exploded in Zaafaraniyah, 25 miles south-east of Baghdad, killing four Iraqi civilians and wounding 10 more. As the death toll mounted, hundreds of protestors took to the streets to demand that US troops leave Iraq if they are unable to protect the Iraqi people.

"We asked them time and again to remove ammunition from residential areas, but in vain," a man who lost his wife, son and brother in the blast told Abu Dhabi television.

The cause of the explosion was not clear. A US officer interviewed by Abu Dhabi television said the explosion was caused by gunmen firing at the dump, but local people said it was caused by Americans detonating old stockpiles. In the Arab view, however, the cause is irrelevant: the occupying force is accountable for any and all casualties.

Arabs no longer have any doubt that protestors in the West were right when they opposed the war on the ground that it was "blood for oil". This, they say, is why American soldiers protected the oil ministry but took no care whatsoever of other ministries or administrative offices that deal with services for the population. If there was ever any doubt about it, it is now an article of faith in the Arab world that America went to war in Iraq to seize oil, not to build democracy.

Few Arabs believed that the Iraqi army, or even the elite Republican Guards, could hold out for long against the strongest and most sophisticated armed forces in history. But, equally few thought that such chaos would follow the collapse of the Iraqi regime. The anti-American demonstrations that have been seen almost everywhere in Iraq do not grow from Muslim hostility towards the US and the West. They are a reaction to post-war anarchy by a people who urgently need an order and a stability that America has not, so far, delivered.

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