

The perfect storm: the World Tribunal on Iraq in Istanbul

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It was on the second day that I got the sense that things were coming together in a way akin to that whereby several climatic disturbances fuse to create what meteorologists have called the “perfect storm.”

It was probably the combination of eyewitness accounts that made clear beyond a shadow of doubt that the siege of Fallujah in November 2004 was a case of collective punishment; a damning expose of how the so-called reconstruction of Iraq was actually meant to make it a free-market paradise for corporations; and a chilling analysis of how White House presidential directives have made it possible for US agents to snatch anyone anywhere in the world and transport him or her to the Guantanamo Naval Base in Cuba on mere suspicion of being an “enemy combatant.”

The implacable truth

The truth came out swinging like a sledgehammer for three memorable days in Istanbul, surprising even the toughest critics of Washington in the audience about how viciously and systematically the Bush administration has ripped apart the fabric of international law, unilaterally rewritten the laws of war, and made the systematic violation of basic human rights the normal mode of governance in Iraq. There were hardly any strident voices among those who testified from June 24-27 at the World Tribunal on Iraq in Istanbul. It was, for the most part, fact laid upon fact, oftentimes in the form of unforgettable images projected onscreen, not only of frightened civilians fleeing the massive firepower that American marines direct at their homes but also of hundreds of hectares of valuable greenery on the outskirts of Baghdad buried under tons of concrete to deprive insurgents of hiding places.

The truth coming out in Istanbul was made even more harsh by the ongoing final collapse of the lies that the US and British governments constructed to justify the invasion and occupation. The release of the now infamous Downing Street memos revealed how early during the Bush administration the decision for invading Iraq was made and how the US and British authorities manufactured the myth of Saddam’s development of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) to justify the planned invasion.

Contradiction seems to have become the order of the day, with Vice President Dick Cheney saying one day that the Iraqi resistance is on its last legs, followed the next by Secretary of Defense Donald

Rumsfeld asserting that the insurgency will go on for years. Meanwhile, the servile US media decry the mess in Iraq, call upon the Bush administration to recognize the bleak realities on the ground, yet assert, like New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman, that withdrawal is not an option and that the only solution is to pour in more US troops into the meat-grinder that Iraq has become.

A collective portrait of deceit and mayhem

Istanbul was a collective portrait of a war drawn in compelling detail. This conflict, we learned, is a war against civilians, since there is no way for the American troops to distinguish between civilians and insurgents, nor do they seem to want to.

It is a war against women and children, as shown by the fact that 250 of the people killed in the second siege of Fallujah were women and children. Rape in post-invasion Iraq, Iraqi witnesses testified, is rampant, but a culture of shame and the lack of any trust in the criminal investigating and prosecuting abilities of the occupation regime has prevented documentation of its scale.

It is a war against culture, with witness after witness decrying the absolute failure of the occupiers to protect 4,000-year-old artifacts from looters, many of whom could have been organized by commercial interests outside Iraq.

It is a war with likely appalling consequences far into the future in the form of rising incidence of leukemia and other cancers owing to the massive quantities of depleted uranium spewed all over the country by American and British shelling.

The damned

While US government actors, decisions, and actions were the main focus of testimonies, other actors were not spared.

The 50-nation "Coalition of the Willing" was portrayed as a bunch of coerced, bribed, or opportunistic governments that dutifully read the script of "invasion-to-rid-Iraq-of-weapons-of-mass-destruction" written by Washington in its futile attempt to provide legitimacy for the invasion.

Ex-United Nations officials Hans von Sponeck and Dennis Robinson showed convincingly why the UN became one of the most hated organizations in Iraq owing to the sanctions regime it implemented before the war and its collaboration with American authorities after the invasion.

Corporate complicity, the Jury of Conscience learned, was extensive, involving not only infrastructure builders like Halliburton and Bechtel and mercenary recruiters like Blackwater and DynCorp but also Royal Dutch Shell, ExxonMobil, British Petroleum and other members of the mafia of Big Oil.

The western media's participation in the manipulation of public opinion was one of the highlights of the tribunal, as witnesses like writer Saul Landau pointed to the complicity not only of right-wing press entities like Fox News but also the icons of the liberal press like the New York Times, whose reporter Judith Miller actively disseminated government disinformation on Saddam's WMD capabilities and whose editorial line continues to be to stabilize the situation in Iraq by sending in many more US troops. Not surprisingly, at the press

conference after the tribunal, jury chairperson Arundathi Roy said, "If there is one thing that has come out clearly in the last few days, it is not that the corporate media supports the global corporate project; it is the global corporate project."

And there was, of course, British Prime Minister Tony Blair. Blair's image as George W. Bush's key collaborator is more than well-deserved, the jury learned. For not only did he push his intelligence services to manufacture evidence to support the myth that Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction, but he was an enthusiastic champion of externally imposed regime change, though his own government lawyers told him bluntly that there could be no justification found for such a course of action in international law. This made him, like Bush, "a very dangerous man, indeed," as one witness put it.

Civil society moves to center stage

The World Tribunal of Iraq was a striking display of how global civil society is supplanting governments and the corporate media as the source of truth, justice, and direction as the latter institutions get universally discredited, and how well it is performing that role. The Istanbul session was the final act of a two-year process of about 20 hearings held in different parts of the world, including London, Mumbai, Copenhagen, Brussels, New York, Japan, Stockholm, South Korea, Rome, Frankfurt, Spain, Tunis, and Geneva. It was a nearly flawless performance of a symphony of sorrow, outrage, and condemnation organized by Turkish peace activists and performed by over a hundred people drawn from all over the world and from all walks of life, with a Jury of Conscience made up of citizens of 10 countries and a Panel of Advocates with 54 members.

It united senior leaders of the transborder people's movement like international lawyer and university professor Richard Falk, head of the panel of advocates, and human rights activist Chandra Muzaffar, with nineties activists like celebrated novelist Arundathi Roy, and members of an even younger generation like Herbert Docena, who presented a universally applauded portrait of the economic colonization of Iraq, Dahr Jamail, who has become one of the most trusted sources of information on the war, and Iraqi activist Rana Mustafa, who risked life and limb along with photojournalist Mark Miller to make sure the world would have a film record of the destruction of Fallujah.

Enemy combatants all

The Jury of Conscience's conclusions and recommendations are likely to have a powerful moral influence on the course of events, especially its call on US and Coalition soldiers to exercise their right to conscientious objection and on communities throughout the world to provide haven for those who heed this call. On the last day of the tribunal, jury leader Arundathi Roy observed that her thoughts and actions would categorize her as an "enemy combatant" in the US government's view. As I joined the thunderous applause for the jury's decisions, I thought, yes, why not, we are all enemy combatants now, and proud of it.

P.S.

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