

ANOTHER VIEWPOINT
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WINNERS AND LOSERS IN THE IRAQ WAR:
IS THERE A SILVER LINING?

Elias H. Tuma

The war by the United States (US) and its so-called coalition against Iraq is almost over. However, the battle for peace and stability has hardly begun, and the cost and benefits of the war are yet to be assessed. While the final effects are still in the making, certain winners and losers can be identified, and a silver lining can be at least imagined.

The losers are people and institutions. Obviously the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein is the main loser, together with the Iraqi Ba'th Party it represented. As people, Saddam and his collaborators who stood for the regime and the party are on the run and most probably will be hunted down and brought to some form of justice. The loser people include also the fallen soldiers on all sides, even though they may have died for causes they cherished. Then there are the civilians who died, and their grieving families, who, in most cases, were innocent bystanders. Those civilians were swept away in the barrage of explosives rained on them by the blind instruments of war as if they did not count as human beings. These losses cannot be recovered or compensated, but they could have been avoided.

Still another victim of the war are those who shall have to forego educational, health, and social benefits and services because of the costs of the war, both in Iraq and in the US.

The institutional losses are easy to enumerate but hard to evaluate. The Iraqi economy and society are now in shambles, materially and organizationally. The destruction inflicted on Iraq's museums and cultural artifacts are beyond reasonable

estimation. Regardless of all good intentions of the occupiers, it will be years before Iraq's economy and society are restored to a reasonable degree of viability and stability. Another institution that has been seriously harmed is the rule of international law as represented by the United Nations Charter. The US has blundered by ignoring the Charter, and by setting a dangerous precedent by sidestepping the Security Council when it failed to secure a resolution endorsing its foregone decision to invade Iraq. An equally dangerous precedent has been the pre-emptive strike approach against weaker countries, even when they are too far away to form a real threat, as has been the case in this war.

Another institutional victim has been the concept of democracy. It is a contradiction in terms to impose democracy by force. Skepticism is already abound on whether the violent approach to create a democracy can be justified or can actually succeed.

On the other side there are winners. Foremost among the winners are the Bush administration 's architects of the policy to invade Iraq. These people must feel proud of the victory of the armed forced they have dispatched to conquer Iraq, even though the end result was never in doubt, given the wide gap in size, training, and equipment between the military forces of the two warring parties. Another winner are the American people, or at least the majority of them who have supported the war. Now they see the American flag flying over Iraq, reflecting American power, nationalism, and patriotism. The American psychic gain is reflected in the sustained endorsement of the policy of war and violence, at least so long as it is far away from home.

On the Iraqi side, the winners include those inside and outside Iraq who feel liberated from the tyranny of Saddam Hussein, and those who aspire to replace him and his regime in the seats of power. These Iraqis may have triumphed, at least vicariously, and now they are competing for the spoils.

There are arguments that the oil companies, the construction companies, and the producers and traders of military equipment are winners. These, however, are business corporations that do not need a war to make profits. Peace can be as more profitable and less risky than war, especially for the corporations that are well managed, technically advanced, and well connected.

On the institutional side, probably the main winner is the military approach of the strong against the weak, at the expense of peaceful negotiations, economic and trade sanctions, and slow and patient diplomacy. The fact that the US military coalition triumphed over Iraq so quickly does not justify the precedent or nullify the harm it inflicted on the diplomatic and negotiated approach to conflict resolution.

However, by far the biggest winner of the war against Iraq is the State of Israel, in at least two ways. On one hand, the US has virtually vindicated the Israeli treatment of the Palestinians in the occupied territories by applying the same methods in Iraq. The US has used disproportionately excessive force. It has destroyed structures often without regard to who might be in those structures. It has incurred great losses among civilians, and it has occupied the country in the name of democracy and security, regardless of the wishes of the native people. On the other hand, without firing a shot, Israel has seen a major, though imaginary threat disabled and removed from the arena. By subduing Iraq, the US has thus taken another major step to guarantee the security of Israel. First, the US managed to neutralize the Gulf countries and most of the North African Arab countries by persuasion, economic and military aid, and by political and diplomatic pressure. Next it mediated a peace agreement between Israel and Egypt and thus rendered an Arab-Israeli war without Egypt most unlikely. Then came the Oslo Agreement and the peace agreement with Jordan, in both of which the US played a major direct or indirect role. Now that Iraq is no longer a threat, the US is focusing its pressure on Syria to tame it and neutralize it, on the pretext of fighting terrorism and moving weapons of mass destruction

(WMD). There remains Lebanon on Israel's borders, but Lebanon has never been a threat. Hizbollah can be a nuisance, but never a threat.

The security prize for Israel may seem like a strike against the Arabs, but it need not be so. In fact there in may lie a double silver lining. First, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict may find a solution. Second, Israel may become free of WMD. The Bush administration and Israel have virtually changed the field in the Israel-Palestine conflict by demanding reform of the Palestinian government, reducing the power of Yasser Arafat, and appointing a sympathetic Palestinian Prime Minister. Now President Bush seems intent on mediating a solution in the form of the Road Plan formulated by the European Union, the US, Russia, and the UN. It is possible that with Israel's security fully guaranteed an agreement can be reached under US guidance.

On the other hand, with all serious threats to Israel virtually eliminated, the US may act in a consistent manner and demand that Israel eliminate its WMD. Israel has so far refused to sign the non-proliferation treaty and has refused to allow international inspection. Yet, the US has failed to raise the issue with Israel or at the Security Council. The US may find it timely now to take action to free the Middle East entirely from WMD.

Will the US now make it its business to bring about peace between Israel and the Palestinians? Will the US help solve the problem of the Palestinian refugees, the conflict over Jerusalem, and occupation of the Palestinian territories? And will the US apply an even-handed approach toward the elimination of WMD from the Middle East region as a whole, including Israel? The US has the chance to strike a big deal for peace, security, and humanity in the Middle East and elsewhere. Let us hope it will take it.

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