

Foreign and Commonwealth Office: 'Who is Tareq Aziz'?

Iraq's former Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister is near death

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The lawyer of Tareq Aziz, Iraq's former Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, said last week that he is near death. Badie Arif Ezzat says he may have less than a month to live. Aziz's daughter Zeinab Aziz has begged for the release of the seventy year old devout Christian, locked away in isolation for nearly three years, charged with nothing, isolated from the world. An incarceration resulting from the illegal actions of a professed devout Christian President and a Prime Minister who assert they 'pray together'. Devotion, truth and humanity are clearly incompatible for some.

Some years ago I gained an interview alone with Tareq Aziz (no 'minder' for me, or ears and eyes bodyguard for him) by mentioning my connection with Geoge Galloway's Emergency Committee on Iraq. Aziz had great regard for Galloway and his passion for Iraq, Palestine and the Arab world. Ironically when Galloway's legenday articulation might possibly shame those (illegally) holding the ailing seventy year old, Galloway is in the self inflicted, isolated, train-wreck television of the Big Brother House.

Over a decade into the crippling US/UK driven UN embargo on Iraq, Aziz - ironically - talked of isolation. What shone from him was his absolute love for his country. The clear impression was of a passionate nationalist, who would have furthered his country's interest in his own way, regardless of the hue of the government he served. Iraqis are a proud people and his frankness regarding vulnerability and deprivation, his dignity, is an abiding memory.

' Prior to the embargo, we had a high standard of free education, from primary school to university and free health care. But one cannot live alone in the world. Nations need to trade, to buy and sell. There has been a sharp deterioration in health, social services, electricity and clean water.' The world's number one date producer was even prohibited from selling its vast, succulent crop.

Due to embargoed equipment and parts, UN allotted oil moneys for basic sustenance, said Aziz, could not be attained, the oil could not be pumped - yet due also to denied fertilizers, pesticides, vetinary products, Iraq was forced to import food, unable to sustain its population through self reliance in the land of 'milk and honey' and where the Garden of Eden is believed to have flourished. Under three years into the embargo: ' ... the World Food Programme warned that "all the pre-famine indicators were now in place" in Iraq' , Aziz said. 'If the US wants to impose military restriction on Iraq, let them do it, but don'tdeny our children milk, health and medicine.'

He talked of the destruction of the 1991 war. ' ... we were left with no telephone or electricity, no clean water, with refineries either crippled or damaged, almost all the bridges bombed, the country virtually divided (Iraq is divided by the great Tigris and Euphrates rivers spanned by soaring four to six lane highway bridges)

But we rebuilt and restored to a certain degree ... ' (Perhaps Kellogg, Brown and Root and other moribund US construction multi-nationals in Iraq, should pop into his reportedly six metre by two cell, for some tips.) He recalled how James Baker, then then US Secretary of State had told him in Geneva, in 1990, that if Iraq did not bow to US (not UN) demands, the country would be: '.. reduced to a pre-industrial age'. ' That remains their objective today', he asserted. Perhaps he is incarcerated for his accurate, astute foresight.

He had more: ' Iraq has the second largest oil reserves - actually, the first. You can find oil where ever you drill ... the US wishes to dominate oil, Saudia Arabia and the Gulf. They want to keep us dormant, to bring in a pro-US government and present that as bringing about "democrocy" and "human rights".We are a "threat to stability", a " threat to the region" '.

But what about human rights, the gassing of the Kurds at Halabja and was Iraq a threat to its neighbours? He replied that Iraq too felt threatened by US bases in the region, that Iraqi Kurds had a better deal than their kin in Iran and Turkey, with virtual autonomy, cultural rights, recognition. He omitted to mention what he clearly knew and the world does now, that as soon as the Kurds were given autonomy, agents of Israel and the CIA established bases and fermented revolution. ' This is a region of conflicts, upheavals, revolutions ...' he said in signposted shorthand. He also reminded how quick : ' ..Iraqis are to revolt, as they did in 1921, 1931, 1947, 1957 and 1968'.

' We failed to anticipate an uprising', former US Iraq ' Viceroy' and ' Terrorist Tzar', Paul Bremer is quoted as saying recently. On Planet State Department the printing press has clearly, yet to be invented.

Aziz had an illuminating slant on US/UN democrocy: ' When we go to the US, we are not allowed to leave New York. Congressmen, old friends, must come to New York to see us. Even a minor official at the UN is not allowed a cup of tea in the lobby with an Iraqi official. The embargo even extends to dialogue. Dialogue is the golden rule to finding solutions. Yet the US accuses us of being undemocratic.'

'Democrocy' bound Iraq has denied Aziz and his fellow Ministers dialogue, freedom, normality for nearly three years. When I left him, his doctor was waiting outside the door, clearly angry at the time I had taken. He had a heart condition and was late for his medication. Two heart attacks later, and with what medical professionals have suggested is a life threatening aneurism, he is still incarcerated. Reportedly one of his sins is not to testify against the former regime. 'Madam Felicity', he said in answer to an unasked question: ' When I was ten years old, I was handing out leaflets in the streets of Baghdad, putting them through people's doors, in order the British did not seize our oil. I will not give upon Iraq now.' Nationalist, patriot, politician, imperfect, loyal to a fault - mortal. Human.

Galloway cannot be reached at the Big Brother House. It takes a real emergency, I was told. Impending death of a friend clearly falls out of that category. Meanwhile Galloway comforts and drapes his coat around a distressed fellow housemate and pretends to be a cat.

The Press Centre at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (considerable experience of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office dictates such a move has to be desparation in the extreme.) Were they to make any representation to the Americans to release Tareq Aziz from jail in Iraq?

'Is he a British citizen?'

'No.'

'Why would we make such representation then?'

'Because Britain and the US spearheaded the Iraq invasion, thus the UK may have some leverage with the US authorities on humanitarian grounds?'

Long silence, then: ' Who is Tareq Aziz?'

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