

‘Swimming up the Tigris’

Book Review of Barbara Nimri Aziz's most recent book

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Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#)

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‘Swimming up the Tigris’, by anthropologist, journalist and broadcaster, Barbara Nimri Aziz. This poignant book, by a woman who knows and loves Iraq, covers both the embargo years and the aftermath. Her astute insights cover both the political games and the resulting human cost.

Writing in one chapter: ‘Imagine’, she writes of a family who had withstood the 1991 onslaught, the embargo’s unique deprivations, numerous bombings, but decided to flee the invasion, fearing for the lives of their children. ‘Imagine’, she writes of each step: leaving all that is precious, pictures, books, mementos; ‘imagine’ entrusting the keys to your neighbor’s gardener, who promises to guard their home as his own; ‘imagine’ delivering the children’s’ precious pet bird to their aunt, ordering the taxi, locking the gate, the children sobbing leaving all that is the centre of your lives.

Florida University Press requested that I write the foreword for ‘Swimming ...’ In the event it was deemed too radical, though a clip appears on the cover. So, in tribute to a remarkable book and labor of love of some years and witness to and experience of terrible grief, of humanity, laughter, in the ‘land between two rivers’, over many, here is the unpublished foreword. Salut, Barbara.

This is a book that had to be written, an insight in to a land and a people demonized and vilified for sixteen years, written by an author, academic and anthropologist, who walks in the shoes of so many, who have suffered so uniquely grievously, due to United Nations’ policies, driven almost entirely by the United States and Britain.

When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, the United Nations imposed an embargo on both countries, seemingly to pressure for a resolution to the dispute. It was, ironically, implemented on Hiroshima Day (6th August) and heralded a silent holocaust and one of the U.N.’s most shameful eras, as it was lifted on Kuwait and ground on for thirteen years for Iraq. Then replaced by illegal invasion, occupation, slaughter and ongoing, unimaginable destruction, heartbreak and bloodshed.

As the western propaganda machine rampaged through the years, the Iraqi people – their warmth, ingenuity, generosity, their humbling welcome to those from countries who had brought them such suffering – were air brushed out of the picture, except by a small band of journalists, activists and aid workers, consumed by an historic injustice and love for those of this complex, haunting, ancient land. Barbara Nimri Aziz, usually traveling alone, was one such, who repeatedly returned, broadcasting and writing, speaking for people whose voices too, had become embargoed. For the outside majority, it seemed just Saddam Hussein, existed, not the twenty five million people (broadly, half of which are under sixteen) of

ancient Mesopotamia, the 'land between two rivers': the biblical Tigris and Euphrates.

Space does not permit an adequate background to the reasons for Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. However, during the eight year Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) losses on both sides which were compared to the first World War and in which the United States backed Iraq (but provided arms to both sides) Kuwaiti settlements encroached well in to Iraq. Iraq's currency was subsequently devalued by Kuwait's oil transactions and during the war, Kuwait engaged in slant drilling under the border and extracting oil from Iraq's vast Rumaila oil field. When efforts to resolve these complexities failed, the Iraqi government approached the then U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, April Glaspie, querying Washington's views, should conflict become an option. Glaspie replied that the U.S. had: '.. no view on Arab-Arab conflicts.' Whatever and about Saddam Hussein, imagine the U.S., response to Mexico's residents settling three hundred kilometers in to the United States beyond the common border - and slant drilling in to Texan oil wells.

Iraq imported, broadly, seventy percent of everything (ironically, largely on the advice of the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization.) With the country bombed 'back to a pre-industrial age', as had been promised by James Baker, then Secretary of State under President George Bush, Senior., catastrophe loomed. The entire manufacturing and industrial base had been destroyed with infrastructure (water de-salination and purification) electricity, communications, medical and food warehouses, roads, the great bridges which joined a country, fractured by the two great rivers. All necessary to rebuild and repair was vetoed by the United Nations Sanctions Committee, in a country which had enjoyed, according to the U.N's own assessment, over ninety percent access to clean water and high quality free medical care and education.

Normality too was vetoed. Professor Magne Raundalen, founder of the Center for Crisis Studies in Bergen, Norway, one of the world's foremost experts on the psychological damage to children in war zones, in 1992, estimated that the children of Iraq were the 'most traumatized child population on earth'. Subject to forty two days of carpet bombings (17th January 1991 - 28th February 1991 - an average of two thousand sorties daily)(1.) they had no way of recovering, of gradual return to normality. School books, paper, pencils, blackboards, pens, were vetoed, in a country, two years running, presented with an Award by UNESCO, in tribute to a free education, from Primary level, through university, in which children born to even illiterate parents, could graduate with a Ph.D. Toys, even a consignment of ping pong balls and children's' bicycles were denied - and inflation became stratospheric. In 1989, one Iraqi Dinar (ID) was worth three U.S. Dollars. By 1992, two hundred and fifty ID - formerly seven hundred and fifty U.S Dollars - would not buy a postage stamp in neighboring Jordan. For most, childhood died in Iraq, with birthday parties, Eid and Christmas celebrations increasingly cancelled - money for presents, for celebratory meals, dwindling or gone, in a country where family celebrations with friends, are the years' highlights, planned in minute detail, anticipated, photographed and joyously embraced.

And the children were dying in their thousands from 'embargo related causes' - 'not with a bang, but with a whimper'. Prior to August 1990, wasting diseases resultant from malnourishment were rarely heard of. Cheap, plentiful food, had led to obesity becoming a medical problem. Kwashiokor and Marasmus, associated with the world's poorest countries, rose respectively, from just 485 in 1990 to 13,744 in 1992 and 5,193 in 1990 to 111,477 in 1992. (2) The same year under five mortality rose from 43.2 per thousand to 128.5 per thousand.(3)

Water born diseases soared. Cholera, of which there had been no cases in 1989-1990, presented 2,100 in 1991-1992; typhoid rose by 1,060 percent and polio, with just ten cases in 1989, presented with one hundred and twenty by 1992. (4) Parts for repairing water vetoed, Iraq's water became a biological weapon, with shattered sewage and water pipes mixing their contents. Yet potassium, vital for rehydration and purchasable over the counter in chemists in the West, was vetoed, as, largely, anti-biotics and diaharoreal treatments.

In strict contravention of the Geneva Convention, on 18th January 1991, the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency circulated a detailed scientific Report on Iraq's complex water system to all Allied Commands. Entitled: 'Iraq Water Vulnerabilities', it detailed the catastrophic health effect bombing the network would have, concluding, that after all the essential purification, distribution and networks were bombed: 'it is estimated that it will take six months, for Iraq's water (systems) to fully degrade.' Professor Tom Nagy of the University of Washington discovered this document, ten years later. A member of the authoritative Association of Genocide Scholars, he presented it for their deliberations. Their verdict was that this shameful, shocking paper, fell within their remit. (5)

Early in the embargo, doctors made a new diagnosis. Mothers too malnourished to breast feed and too poor to buy milk powder, a tin of which exceeded the monthly salary of many, fed their baby sugared water, or sugared tea. All became bloated, chronically malnourished and almost all died. Doctors named them: 'The sugar babies'. Cancers became epidemic, as did birth defects. Conditions linked with the radioactive and chemically toxic depleted uranium weapons used by the U.S. and Britain, waste from the nuclear industry, dust from which if inhaled or ingested, causes genetic mutations and is carcinogenic. Cancer medications were largely vetoed, so living in their irradiated land, Iraqis suffered only the detrimental effects of radiation and little of the therapeutic. 'There is a hole where my heart should be', a young doctor suddenly remarked on one visit, stroking the heads of her small, doomed patients. Another quoted Goethe: 'Man can only stand so much pain, after that he either dies, or sinks in to apathy.' Iraqis, between the embargo and the thirteen years of subsequent U.S., U.K., bombing and ultimate invasion, could not avoid dying, but apathy was not an option. British colonialist, writer and spy, Gertrude Bell who never the less was captivated by Iraq, encapsulated the spirit in an undated essay in the 1930's. She wrote of the 'romance' of this 'cradle of civilization' - and of the people: 'The enterprise, the rigors, the courage...' They remain undimmed.

Over the embargo years, death stalked Iraq's children from the moment of birth - and the embargo's mass graves will for ever be a monument to a U.S., U.K., driven wickedness which equals that of Pol Pot. In 1998 one man finally fixated the world's attentions on this unique wickedness. Denis Halliday, distinguished U.N. career diplomat and a U.N. Assistant Secretary General, appointed as U.N. Coordinator in Iraq, resigned, from the post and the U.N., calling the embargo: 'genocide', adding that: 'history will slaughter those responsible.' He traveled the globe, talking of the plight of the Iraqi people.

Fifteen months later, his successor, Count Hans von Sponeck also resigned in shame and disgust, joining Halliday in speaking out, world wide. 'Anyone who has been there and seen for themselves, could do nothing else', he told me. Between them, Halliday and von Sponeck had given sixty six years service to the U.N. The day after von Sponeck resigned, Jutta Burghardt, Chief of the (U.N.) World Food Programme in Iraq, also resigned: 'The middle class is disappearing and the stunted children will never recover.' Representative David Bonier talked of: 'Infanticide masquerading as policy' and seventy Members of Congress signed a letter to President Clinton, demanding a change in policy. Baghdad

airport had been rebuilt and reopened for sporadic flights and neighboring countries, shamed at Iraq's plight took less notice of the embargo's strictures -and though, for most, the poverty ground on, the soul, the hope, began to return to the nation. 'For us the embargo is over', was a repeated refrain. And the isolation, as debilitating as the deprivation, began to recede. ' Every time a 'plane comes in, there are tears in our eyes', remarked a friend.

Then came the Presidency of George W. Bush, the threats, the lies, culminating in the illegal invasion. Few could encapsulate, as Barbara Nimri Aziz, the spirit, the laughter, courage, tears of the people of this extraordinary, haunting, complex land, where Baghdad was described as : 'the Paris of the ninth century' , (6) where civilization flourished before Mohammed and Christ walked the earth. For believers, the land of the Garden of Eden, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, of Ur, where Abraham, father of Islam, Christianity and Judaism was suckled on two fingers, one which brought forth milk, the other honey, thus 'land of milk and honey'. Land of humanity's history - where the 'liberated' now write of the embargo's horrors as : 'golden years'.

Paul William Roberts writes of the invasion :

'.... the old people with resignation stamped across their foreheads, who can't go on yet will go on; the young married couples who still hope for a better life yet don't hope too hard lest it break their hearts, the countless unremembered acts of kindness and of love that fill desolate days, and I realize I would far prefer to be here than in any house where this war is justified. For it cannot be justified.

'But this region has always led to somewhere worth going. Baghdad is just as glorious in its ruin as it was in its glory. For something noble crawls from the rubble, to spread golden wings in the light of dawn. The gate of God opens wider.'

Barbara Nimri Aziz opens many gates, to unique, astute and eye misting, insights. Every American and British politician should read this book and sink to their knees in shame.

Notes

1.The Fire this Time: Ramsey Clark, Thunder mouth Press, 1992.

2.ibid.

3.The Children are Dying ; Report by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, World View Forum, 1995.

4.The Fire this Time.

5.How the U.S. Deliberately Destroyed Iraq's Water; www.commondreams.org 29th August 2001.Thanks to Professor Nagy, Iraq Water Vulnerabilities has numerous Google entries for interested researchers. The paper can be fully downloaded.

6.The Jew, the Gypsy and El Islam, Sir Richard Burton, 1898.

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