

The Politics of the UN Tragedy

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Note: This article was originally published on our website in September 2003, shortly after the Canal Hotel bombing in Iraq. It deals with US empire building in the Middle East via UN-sponsored operations and addresses the colonial mindset/gross double standards of some UN officials charged with carrying out this aim. The article remains relevant today, for it accurately points to the UN as a “bogus body of vassal agencies run by hand picked functionaries” that has “lost its independence and utility as a force for peace”. Indeed, not much has changed over the past twelve years; like Iraq 10 years ago, the UN’s recent destruction of Libya and Syria are testimony to the fact that this international organization carries on betraying the very principles it is intended to embody .

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The bombing of the United Nations compound in Iraq has provoked anger, sorrow, bombastic bluster from the Bush Administration and unreflective promises to “carry on the humanitarian mission” from the Secretary General Kofi Annan. Debate and discussion, to the degree that it has appeared in the mass media focuses on who was responsible for the “security lapses”, the UN and its supporters pointing to the incompetence of the US occupation army, the US officials blaming the UN officials for negligence. These discussions are secondary, technical matters and fail to deal with the deeper political reasons behind the attack of the UN.

The pro-Israeli neo-conservatives in Washington predictably attribute the UN bombing to Arab-Islamic-terrorism and lump together the bombing of an Israeli bus and the UN as justification for greater US and Israeli violence. The center-left praise the diplomatic and humanistic virtues of the UN’s special representative in Iraq, Sergio Viera de Mello and with unblinking incomprehension claim that the bombing harmed the cause of the Iraqi people and set back the process of national reconstruction.

Both UN and US officials, neo-conservatives and center-left intellectuals fail to analyze the actual political role of the United Nations in Iraq and particularly the partisan political role of Sergio Viera de Mello which might have provoked the attack.

The United Nations led by Kofi Annan has not played an impartial role in the US- Iraq conflict. For over a decade the UN supported economic sanctions against Iraq, causing over 1 million Iraqi deaths, mostly children and the resignation of two top UN officials in protest. UN inspectors oversaw the disarming of Iraqi defenses and ignored or approved the US-British bombing of Iraq for over 12 years. Up to the final hour of the US invasion of Iraq, the entire attention of the UN was directed toward pressuring the Iraqi government to accept US demands, not condemning US war preparations, even as the Security Council did ultimately

refuse to give approval to the unilateral US invasion. The historical record of the decade preceding the invasion clearly puts the UN on the side of the US, to the point that several of the UN inspectors were identified as working with the CIA and conducting searches and providing strategic information to US military intelligence.

To this some writer may object and argue that UN-US collaboration was a thing of the past, after the US military conquest the UN has not supported the colonial occupation and promoted a transition to democratic self-rule. Published documents, official interviews and UN resolutions present a far different picture. One in which the UN accepted and worked with US colonial ruler, Paul Bremer in an attempt to consolidate US control of the occupied country.

After the disastrous month in office of the first US colonial governor Garner, and his replacement by Paul Bremer, it became clear even to the most tenacious and bloody militarist in the Pentagon that imperial rulership was resulting in a powerful resistance movement of all sectors of Iraqi society and the total isolation of the US colonial regime from every Arab, Muslim or European regime (except England and of course Israel). The Bush Administration was adamant in its demand for total power in Iraq, but was willing to allow the UN to operate under US rule. Annam dispatched Viera de Mello to work with the US colonial governor Bremer and he was a brilliant political success in terms that were advantageous to US colonial power. Viera de Mello's UN mission was to collaborate with Bremer and directed toward creating an advisory junta (Interim Iraqi National Council) that would provide a figleaf for US colonial control. Operating under Resolution 1483 passed by the Security Council on May 22, 2003, de Mello was assigned eight areas of activity, all of which had to do with the "reconstruction" of the country especially in the political sphere. De Mello was active in enticing tribal leaders, conservative clerics as well as exile prodigies of the Pentagon to form the junta, with the proviso that the US colonial governor approved all of its members, and that all approved the US invasion and occupation. In effect de Mello organized a powerless collection of self-appointed elites who had no credibility in Iraq or legitimacy among the Iraqi populace, to serve as window dressing for US colonial rule. Once the US approved junta was in place, de Mello traveled throughout the Middle East trying to convince neighboring countries that the US "creation", opposed by the majority of Iraqis was a legitimate and representative "transitional regime". De Mello's main argument was that the US appointed junta was a "governing" and not merely "advisory" body, an argument that convinced nobody, least of all the US officials handing out contracts to Halliburton Corporation and organizing the privatization of Iraqi oil and certainly not the US military terrorizing and shooting innocent Iraqi civilians.

Both UN resolution 1483 in pursuit of "reconstruction" under US colonial rule and de Mello's active role in promoting and defending the US puppet interim regime were not disinterested humanitarian activities. These were political positions - commitments that involved acceptance of US colonial rule, and a clear and deliberate decision to use the United Nations as a vehicle for legitimating imperial rulership via an impotent and corrupt junta rejected by the Iraqi people. De Mello was certainly aware of the concentration of power in the hands of Bremer, he was certainly aware that the Iraqi people - who were never given a voice or vote in its selection, rejected the junta; he actively participated in excluding any anti-colonial critics from the council. His close working relationship with Paul Bermer, the US ruler of Iraq certainly undermined any pretense that the United Nations was an independent force in Iraq. In the eyes of the Iraqis and two former top UN officials (Boutros Gali and Denis Halliday) the UN and in particular Kofi Annan and de Mello were appendages of US colonial

power.

Denis Halliday, the former UN Assistant Secretary General and UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Iraq recently stated that the bombing of the UN in Iraq was payback for collusion with the US. On August 24, 2003 in an interview with The Sunday Herald (Scotland) he noted that "further collaboration" between the UN and the US and Britain "would be a disaster for the United Nations as it would be sucked into supporting the illegal occupation of Iraq. The UN has been drawn into being an arm of the US - a division of the State Department. Kofi Annan was appointed and supported by the US and that has corrupted the independence of the UN".

In an interview with the BBC, Boutros Boutros Ghali, former Secretary General of the UN, speaking in the aftermath of the bombing, stated "the perception in a great part of the Third World is that the United Nations, because of the American (sic) influence is a system which discriminated (against) many countries of the Third World." George Monbiot of the British newspaper The Guardian (August 25, 2003) observes: "The US government has made it perfectly clear that the UN may operate in Iraq only as a subcontractor. Foreign troops will take their orders from Washington." None of these remarks appeared in any form in any of the US mass media.

The UN has moved very far from its original founding principles. As one time the UN stood for peace, social justice and self-determination and opposed colonial wars, pillage of national wealth and colonial rule. Given the active partisan role of the UN in Iraq, in creating a political framework compatible with prolonged US colonial rulership, it is not at all a mystery why the Iraqi resistance targeted the UN building just as it targets the imperial army and the oil pipelines up for sale to US and European multinational corporations. Having taken sides with the US, it is the height of hypocrisy for top UN officials to claim to be innocent victims. Just as it is deceptive for US and UN officials to claim that the anti-colonial resistance is made up of "foreigners", Saddam Hussein "remnants", Al Qaeda terrorists, Sunni extremists or Iranian Shiites. The resistance is not confined to areas where Saddam Hussein was popular, nor is it limited to areas of Sunni believers; it is in the north and south, east and west, covering all ethnic and religious regions and enclaves. The resistance is national, indigenous and based on opposition to US colonial occupation, destruction of infrastructure and the physical and psychological degradation of 23 million Iraqis. While the Iraqis suffer from 80% unemployment and go without clean water, food and electricity, high UN officials draw salaries between \$80,000 to \$150,000 a year, are chauffeured in luxury cars and SUV's, work in air conditioned offices and dine on fresh imported food in comfortable apartments or villas - enjoying the best of colonial life. One does not need to introduce the Al Qaeda hypothesis to understand how political and personal resentment against these self-important imperial collaborators could boil over into a violent attack.

It is clear to many in the Middle East that the UN has become a bogus body of vassal agencies run by hand picked functionaries like de Mello, whose charm and cleverness does not compensate for their collaboration in US empire building. For a growing number of professionals, journalists and particularly ordinary people it is becoming clear that the United Nations has lost its independence and utility as a force for peace. Increasingly social movements and Third World nations are looking to new international organizations and forums to pursue the principles, which the UN has betrayed. The new body will have to renounce the elitist character of the current UN with its two tiered system of voting and power; it will have to reject membership to countries which embrace "preventive" wars of conquest and colonial rule and pillage of national resources. In a word the new international

organization and its secretary-general must not be an appendage of Washington – if it wishes to avoid the tragedy of the UN – a body which started with great ideals and ended as a cynical manipulator of ideals in the services of imperial power.

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