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Supporting Iraq's Right to Resist Occupation

- Debate - Problems of the Arab and Middle East regions -

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THE IRAQI resistance to U.S. occupation is growing, as is its support among ordinary Iraqis. Iraq's interim government recently admitted that the insurgency involves at least 40,000 “hardcore fighters” and up to 200,000 active sympathizers—a far cry from the isolated 5,000 “Baathist remnants” and “foreign fighters” the Pentagon initially claimed to be fighting.

A USA Today/Gallup poll conducted in March concluded, “The insurgents...seem to be gaining broad acceptance, if not outright support. If the [pro-U.S.] Kurds, who make up about 13 percent of the poll, are taken out of the equation, more than half of Iraqis say killing U.S. troops can be justified in at least some cases.”

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/socialists1.jpg>]

ISO banner on global justice march

That was shortly before the first siege on Falluja, in which U.S. forces killed over 600 civilians before the armed resistance drove them out. Support for the resistance can only have grown now that U.S. bombs have flattened Falluja, killing hundreds more civilians and driving 200,000 residents to live in the squalor of refugee camps—while dispersing the resistance fighters to other localities.

In mid-December, for example, Knight Ridder reported on a 41-year-old Iraqi woman, Kifah Khudhair, injured in a car bombing in Baghdad—whose rage was directed not at the car bombers, but at the Americans. “What can we do?” her son said. “These things happen every day, like looting and murder. I am angry at the Americans because it is all their fault. This is all because of them.”

IRAQIS SUPPORT RESISTANCE

IRAQIS SUPPORT the resistance against the U.S. occupation of their country for one simple reason: they want the Americans to get out—now.

Yet many in the U.S. antiwar movement have had difficulty accepting this black-and-white reasoning, preferring to see the world in shades of gray. “[Iraqi] jihadis or America's terror-using hypocrites? If we are truly to stop the terrorists, the world must take sides against both,” wrote New Left veteran Steve Weissman recently on Truthout.

This argument by Weissman is faulty on two counts.

First, Weissman equates the 500-pound bombs and high-tech weapons used by the world's biggest superpower occupying Iraq (at the cost of \$7.8 billion per month) to the rocket-propelled grenades and roadside bombs of those resisting that occupation. One side aims to control Iraq to fulfill its grand plan to dominate the Middle East and its oil. The other merely seeks the right for Iraqis to determine their own future.

Some 100,000 Iraqi civilians are now estimated dead because of the war and occupation. This followed the roughly 1 million Iraqis killed from the deprivation caused by more than a decade of economic sanctions. And this followed a death toll of up to 200,000 in the 1991 Gulf War. Choosing sides should not be so difficult.

Without for a moment endorsing the tactic of targeting civilians, which is used by parts of the resistance, the sheer

magnitude of the death and destruction inflicted by the U.S. upon ordinary Iraqis should dispel any myth that the two sides in this war deserve equal condemnation.

Moreover, Weissman accepts at face value the Bush administration's absurd characterization of the insurgency as dominated by "terrorists" and Islamic "extremists."

On December 15, the Boston Globe published a report by Molly Bingham, who lived from August 2003 until June 2004 in Baghdad researching the resistance. She observed, "The composition of the Iraqi resistance is not what the U.S. administration has been calling it, and the more it is oversimplified, the harder it is to explain its complexity. I met Shia and Sunnis fighting together, women and men, young and old. I met people from all economic, social and educational backgrounds."

She continued: "The original impetus for almost all of the individuals I spoke to was a nationalistic one—the desire to defend their country from occupation, not to defend Saddam Hussein or his regime." Bingham's conclusion should help focus the aims of every antiwar activist in the U.S.: "The resistance will continue until American influence has disappeared from Iraq's political system."

GO BEYOND ABSTRACT PRINCIPLES

SUPPORT FOR the right of Iraqis to resist occupation must extend beyond an abstract principle for the U.S. antiwar movement.

While recognizing "the right of the Iraqi people to resist as a point of principle," Phyllis Bennis of the Institute for Policy Studies—in widely circulated notes for a speech to the steering committee of United for Peace and Justice (UFPJ) on December 18—argued, "We should not call for 'supporting the resistance' because we don't know who most of them are and what they really stand for, and because of those we do know, we mostly don't support their social program beyond opposition to the occupation."

To be meaningful, however, supporting the "right to resist" must include support for that resistance once it actually emerges.

Award-winning Indian writer and global justice activist Arundhati Roy got to the heart of the issue in a San Francisco speech on August 16: "It is absurd to condemn the resistance to the U.S. occupation in Iraq, as being masterminded by terrorists," she said. "After all, if the United States were invaded and occupied, would everybody who fought to liberate it be a terrorist?"

If we are waiting for the "ideologically pure" movement—assuming the unlikely scenario that all those opposed to the war could agree on one—we could be waiting forever.

As Roy explained, "Like most resistance movements, [the Iraqis] combine a motley range of assorted factions. Former Baathists, liberals, Islamists, fed-up collaborationists, communists, etc. Of course, it is riddled with opportunism, local rivalry, demagoguery and criminality. But if we were to only support pristine movements, then no resistance will be worthy of our purity.

"Before we prescribe how a pristine Iraqi resistance must conduct their secular, feminist, democratic, nonviolent

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battle, we should shore up our end of the resistance by forcing the U.S. and its allied governments to withdraw from Iraq.”

Focus on the Global South's Walden Bello made a similar point in June. “What western progressives forget is that national liberation movements are not asking them mainly for ideological or political support,” he wrote. “What they really want from the outside is international pressure for the withdrawal of an illegitimate occupying power so that internal forces can have the space to forge a truly national government based on their unique processes. Until they give up this dream of having an ideal liberation movement tailored to their values and discourse, U.S. peace activists will, like the Democrats they often criticize, continue to be trapped within a paradigm of imposing terms for other people.”

THE U.S. antiwar movement should heed this advice and expend less energy in judging the character of the Iraqi resistance and more effort on building a visible resistance to the Iraq occupation from inside the U.S.

When the U.S. invaded Falluja and the Abu Ghraib torture scandal broke in the spring of 2004, the U.S. antiwar movementâ€”already ensconced in its misguided effort to elect prowar John Kerryâ€”declined to mount a visible response to these and other atrocities committed by the U.S. in Iraq, effectively sparing the Bush administration from the need to account for its war crimes.

The main challenge for antiwar activists in the United States is to rebuild a visible, national antiwar movement. That means opposing the January 30 electionâ€”held under martial law, which will effectively exclude 50 percent of the populationâ€”and supporting the resistance that exposes its utter hypocrisy.

Is this strategy too ambitiousâ€”too far to the left for “mainstream” America? That is unlikely, since a majority of Americans continue to oppose the war.

U.S. troops are also divided, and we need to actively support those troops whoâ€”at great personal riskâ€”are resisting. The latest is U.S. Army Sgt. Kevin Benderman, who refused to redeploy to Iraq earlier this month after serving there from March to September 2003.

“The people that we are fighting now are for the most part people like you and me, people who are defending themselves against a superior military force and fighting to keep that which is rightfully theirs,” Benderman said. He added that the Iraqi people have the right to choose their own form of government, “just like we did in America after the revolution.”

The antiwar movement must not lose sight of the fact that its main enemy is at homeâ€”and any resistance to that enemy deserves our unconditional support.

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