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Iraq

The continuous suffering

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The events of recent weeks in Iraq that led to the capture of Mosul (the second largest city in the country), causing 500,000 people to flee, as well as the fall of other cities, by a coalition of diverse reactionary groups composed primarily by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Sham (ISIS), former Baathists and local tribe chiefs, constitute the continuation of the long agony of the Iraqi people since 2003 and even before in many aspects.

It must be remembered that the country was under the bloody dictatorship of Saddam Hussein's clan that caused the death, exile and imprisonment of tens of thousands of people, not to mention the gassing of Kurds in Halabja in 1988. This regime was built on a totalitarian repressive apparatus that accepted no political opposition and independent trade unions, and on a clientelist tribal and sectarian basis. In no way was it nationalist as some authors have characterized it.

The main reason, however, for the current and disastrous situation in the country is the American and British military invasion of 2003 and the coalition's subsequent policies in the country. The interventions of regional countries, particularly Iran and Saudi Arabia, played a role as well and exacerbated sectarianism by supporting sectarian and reactionary groups as a means to advance their own interests. Finally, the sectarian and repressive policies of the Maliki government added a strain on an already volatile situation.

Contrary to what has been suggested by some medias and so called analysts, the current events in Iraq are not the result of an ancestral hatred between Sunnis and Shiites that goes back to more than 1000 years, but truly are the result of current and contemporary policies.

In addition to the military invasion that came after more than 10 years of inhumane sanctions, killed a million Iraqis and incurred the forced displacement of 4 millions, the U.S. occupation policies are at the origin of the current debacle: fierce repression of any political opposition to the U.S. occupation, implementation of neoliberal policies and repression of independent trade union movement, destruction of state institutions (military, public administration, university system, etc.), establishment of a political system based on political sectarianism as in Lebanon and as a basis of construction of the new state administrations etc.; the latter element was one of the main reasons of the terrible sectarian war between Sunnis and Shia extremist groups between 2005 and 2008, resulting in a monthly average of 3000 dead.

At the same time, Saudi Arabia and Iran supported extremist and reactionary religious groups to promote their own interests, like in other countries elsewhere in the region, especially in Lebanon and Syria.

The spectacular rise of ISIS and its allies in recent months has nevertheless to be understood in the framework and as a result as well of the authoritarian and sectarian policies of Maliki's regime in recent years.

Popular protests shook the country in early 2011, in the wake of the popular uprisings in the region. They started on February 25, 2011 by a Day of Wrath, which then launched a weekly cycle of protest on Fridays in most major cities. Demands were diverse, ranging from the fight against unemployment, which is still very high, condemnation of the lack or absence of services such as electricity, the release of political prisoners, opposition to the whole sectarian political system established by the occupation of the USA. The movement was made up of members of civil society, women's groups, trade unionists, etc.

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Popular gatherings exceeded sometimes the tens of thousands, while for example in the city of Mosul, the protesters called for a general strike pushing the local governor Atheel al-Nujaifi to support the popular protests and support the violation of the curfew imposed by the government.

Popular demonstrations represented a serious challenge to Maliki's government, with many local politicians resigning, including two in the city of Basra. Above all, public squares of protests became politicized poetry sites and areas of cultural performances, drawing on the rich Iraqi cultural heritage.

The government was quick to react with systematic repression, using tear gas and live ammunition, the establishment of numerous checkpoints, including forcing people to walk for hours in the scorching heat to join public squares generally easily accessible. Security forces also forbade all pens, markers, poster board, and bottles of water to people going to public squares to protest.

Political consolidation within the ruling elite of Iraq has nevertheless allowed the Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to co-opt local dissident politicians such as in Basra while continuing the repression of the popular movement.

At the same time, Maliki's government continued an increasingly sectarian policy against the Sunni population. He refused for example the integration of the Sunni awakening councils, which had fought Al Qaeda, in the army; he maintained the anti-Baathist law established after the U.S. invasion against former leaders close to Saddam Hussein, but mainly used by the Iraqi Prime Minister to suppress all Sunni political forces, while accusing leading Sunni politicians of supporting terrorism, usual tool of repressive regimes in the region to suppress any opposition as we can see in Egypt and in Syria today. The Maliki government has also systematically discriminated Sunnis in the State public administration.

In 2013, a popular movement in the Sunni-majority areas led a mass campaign of non-violent resistance against Maliki's government, and particularly its sectarian and authoritarian policies. Popular mass demonstrations and sit-ins were held in this period demanding the release of political prisoners, especially thousands of women prisoners, more jobs and better public services, and the removal of the Iraqi constitution. The protesters especially opposed the anti-terrorist laws used by the Iraqi government to suppress opposition members with accusations of links with Al-Qaeda or the Baath Party of Saddam Hussein. At that time, leaders of the Iraqi Shiite group of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq and of Moqtada al-Sadr's movement, who had their own grievances against the Maliki regime, expressed their solidarity with the protests made almost in its entirety by Iraqi Sunnis and threatened to organize their own demonstrations. Unfortunately, no trans-confessional solidarity materialized, neither inter-ethnic, despite criticism and opposition of Kurdish groups against the Maliki government.

The Maliki regime bloodily suppressed the popular protests, as it did against the movement of February 25, 2011 when Iraq witnessed popular protests across the country. The government also used tactics taken directly from the U.S. occupation districts wholly or partially destroyed, mass arrests and torture. The intensification of the repression of the Maliki government pushed some of the protesters and groups to join ISIS, which opposes the Iraqi regime for sectarian reasons, and it gained increasing importance in Sunni-majority areas. The Iraqi army, rebuilt on sectarian foundations by the Maliki government and undermined by corruption, was increasingly perceived as an army of occupation by people in areas with a Sunni majority and it is for this reason that some saw in their departure a liberation, but without considering necessarily the newcomers as liberators. The Practices of ISIS (imposition of reactionary religious laws on the population, particularly affecting women, sectarian assassinations, authoritarianism, destruction of pre-Islamic archaeological objects and other, etc) will most likely be resisted very quickly by local populations, as it has been the case in Syria.

On his side, Maliki has used the sectarian threat of ISIS to push Moqtada Sadr to organize demonstrations in support of the Iraqi state and has asked for the support of the Ayatollah Sistani, the highest Shiite religious authority of Iraq.

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Maliki has also mobilized Shiite sectarian militias to oppose ISIS.

The solution is of course to oppose the jihadist reactionary forces of ISIS, allied with former Baathists, but also to oppose the Maliki government with its sectarian and authoritarian policies and reactionary forces that support it. These two actors feed each other and have to be overthrown and defeated in order of hoping to build a social and progressive popular movement opposing sectarianism enabling Iraq to end a nightmare that has lasted too long.

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[1] As a reminder, ISIS is the product of al-Qaeda in Iraq, which emerged during the American occupation in 2006