

UK: The enemy of my enemy is not my friend!

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For the first time, it was our relatives in Iraq who anxiously called to inquire about our health and well-being, not the other way around as it has been the case for so long.

Right now, Iraq must be the most acutely dangerous place in terms of both occupation forces as well as militant resistance. Yet people in many other cities around the world have to live with that daily fear: Whether in Baghdad, Ramallah, Jerusalem or Kabul, violence is a daily burden on everyone's mind if not an actual occurrence.

Although many friends I have been politically involved with in the context of anti-sanctions and anti-war activism agree that the so-called "war on terror" can not be fought with bombs, only few seem to acknowledge that neither can we fight US imperialism with violence. This is particularly the case where most of the victims of this violence are innocent civilians. In Iraq, for example, thousands of men, women and children have been killed just because they happen to be passing by, or waiting at a petrol station, a market, a mosque, in front of a police station or a street at the wrong time. Can we call the killing of Iraqi civilians, foreign humanitarian workers (and, I would also add, diplomats) resistance? For me, the idea of these killings being a necessary if regrettable 'by-product' of the fight against imperialism is as twisted and perverse as the infamous statement by Madeline Albright about "a price worth paying" when speaking about the thousands of Iraqi children dying in the context of economic sanctions and the attempt to contain Saddam Hussein.

To make it very clear: in my activism and writings, I have been anti-sanctions, anti-war and anti-occupation. But being against, never meant automatically being for someone or something. That held true for the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein in the past as well as for those fighters terrorizing the Iraqi population today. What I have found so disheartening and frustrating when participating in anti-war and anti-occupation events during the past months is the black and white depiction of the world and the lack of clarity where the Iraqi resistance is concerned. At the recent World Tribunal on Iraq in Istanbul, for example, almost every speaker either began or finished his or her talk with a similar statement: "We have to support the Iraqi resistance!" Many speakers added that this was not just a matter of fighting the occupation inside Iraq but part of a wider struggle against encroaching neo-colonialism, neo-liberalism and imperialism. But none of the speakers explained to the jury of conscience, the audience and their fellow speakers what they actually meant by 'the resistance'.

No one felt it was necessary to differentiate between, on the one hand, the right of self-defence and the patriotic attempt to resist foreign occupation and, on the other, the unlawful indiscriminate killings of non-combatants. Neither did anyone question the motivations and goals of many of the numerous groups, networks, individuals and gangs grouped all too casually under 'the resistance' - a term that through lack of clear definition has been used to encompass various forms of non-violent political oppositions, armed resistance, terrorism and mafia-type criminality. Again by failing to explicitly define and differentiate, proponents of the unconditional support slogan end up grouping together the large part of the Iraqi population opposing US occupation and engaging in every-day forms of resistance, with remnants of the previous regime, Iraqi-based Islamist militias,

foreign jihadis, mercenaries and criminals.

Views about armed resistance vary amongst the Iraqi population reflecting the diversity of Iraqi society, not simply in terms of religious and ethnic backgrounds as many commentators would like us to believe, but diversity in terms of social class, place of residence, specific experiences with the previous regime and the ongoing occupation as well as political orientation. However, based on talks with friends and family inside as well as various opinion polls, I would argue that the majority of Iraqis do not translate their opposition to the occupation into support for militant insurgents killing Iraqis. I also find it hard to believe that the majority of Iraqis would actually support the kidnapping, torturing and killing of foreign workers whatever their occupation.

Ironically it is the lack of security on the streets of Iraqi cities today that persuades many people, who in principle want US and British forces out of their country, not to ask for an immediate withdrawal. Obviously the lack of security is an effect of the recent war and the ongoing occupation. The latter is without doubt a brutal continuation of an illegal war, having already killed and maimed thousands of civilians through numerous conventional and unconventional weapons. US and UK troops have been involved in the systematic torture of prisoners as well as other violations of international human rights conventions and humanitarian law. But the fact is that when an Iraqi leaves his or her house in the morning wondering whether he or she will see their loved ones again, it could either be a sniper or bomb from the occupation forces or a suicide bomb that could kill them. To abuse an old cliché, Iraqis are caught between many rocks and many hard places.

The culture of violence and the underlying fascist ideology of many of the groups operating on Iraqi soil today is not a viable alternative to US imperialism. While we all know that Bush is not about freedom and democracy, please let's stop calling local and foreign suicide bombers "freedom fighters". I am not sure how long most of those unconditionally supporting the resistance today would last inside Iraq if the militant insurgents responsible for killing and kidnapping Iraqi civilians and foreigners would actually prevail.

There is no doubt that the previous Coalition Provisional Authority and the various transitional governments have lacked credibility amongst the majority of the Iraqi population. Reconstruction has been incredibly slow and fraught with corruption and ill-management. Yet, the seeds for genuine political transformation, the rebuilding of physical and political spaces and a non-violent opposition to foreign occupation have been made more and more impossible by the increasing violence and instability caused by the insurgency. And there are non-violent ways of resisting: continuous images of hundred-thousands even millions of Iraqis - men, women and children of all ages and backgrounds - demonstrating peacefully on the streets of Iraq would send a very forceful message across the world: a message that could not be ignored by Washington and London, especially if Iraqis are joined by people all over the world taking to the streets in solidarity.

At the same time Iraqis, lobbying their own government - as flawed as the process of election was - through civil society associations, city councils and various other institutions, can resist foreign encroachment and the imposition of outside political actors, values and economic systems. Iraqis at the grassroots level did start to group together, mobilize and resist non-violently, and they continue to do so. Women activists have been at the forefront of these actions and initiatives. Yet, the political spaces have been shrinking not simply as a function of ongoing occupation and the type of government in place, but also, and crucially, because of the lack of security caused by violent insurgents.

For those of us concerned about the erosion of women's rights inside Iraq, Islamist militants pose a particular danger. Many women's organisations and activists inside Iraq have documented the increasing attacks on women, the pressure to conform to certain dress codes, the restrictions in movement and behaviour, incidents of acid thrown into women's faces. and even killings. It is extremely short-sighted for anyone not to condemn these types of attacks, but for women this becomes existential. Women and 'women's issues' have, of course, been instrumentalized - in Afghanistan, but also in Iraq. We know that both Bush and Blair have tried to co-opt the language of democracy and human rights, especially women's rights. But them instrumentalizing women does not mean that we should condone or accept the way Islamist militants are, for their part, using women symbolically and attacking them physically to express their resistance.

It is high time to be much clearer about what we should support and what not. It is high time to abandon the unconditional support for terrorists and criminals responsible for the killing of Iraqi civilians. It is high time to acknowledge that Iraqis inside are divided along many different lines and that glossing over these differences does not help national unity in the long run. It is high time to seriously look for non-violent means of resistance to the occupation in Iraq and wider US imperialism. It is high time to recognize that the enemy of my enemy is not necessarily my friend.