

BAHRAIN

Issued by the "Bahrain Freedom Movement" for promoting Human and Constitutional Rights

What future for Iraq after the illegitimate war?

The war that had been waged against Iraq by the United States and Britain is a venture that defies logic, is devoid of international legitimacy and is potentially very destructive and destabilising to the world. Washington went ahead with attacking Iraq despite the anger expressed by Dr Hans Blix, the UN Chief Inspector, Kofi Annan, UN Secretary General and the most powerful countries of the European Union. The Christian church stood firmly against the war, while the anti-war movement was able to mobilise millions of protesters in the streets of most world capitals. It is seen as a serious step on a dangerous road towards US unilateralism and hegemony. The United Nations has been sidelined when it became clear that it could not give the US a mandate to wage the war. Europe remained largely opposed to the war while Britain chose to follow in the American steps. The Labour government was dealt several blows as ministers resigned and party members expressed outrage at the decision by Tony Blair to take part in the war in the absence of a second resolution authorising the use of force against Iraq.

Opposition to the war is not an automatic support to Saddam Hussain and his regime. It is an expression of outrage in the face of a flagrant violation by the US of the international stand in opposition to the military confrontation with Iraq. Saddam Hussain's departure from the scene is a welcome news not only to the people of Iraq but to the region in general. His reign has been the bloodiest Iraq has seen for centuries. Thousands of citizens were killed or tortured by his secret service, which is the most vicious in the Middle East. For thirty years, the people of Iraq have been subjected to the most cruel treatment by the regime, while their cries for help were ignored by the West. Before Saddam's war against Iran, torture and executions were rampant in the country, while Saddam ruthlessness observed no bounds, and extended even to his own inner circle. As far back as 1971, three years after the coming to power of the Ba'th Party, torture was practiced as a routine in police cells. Abdul Sahib Dkhayel's body was burnt in acid that year following his arrest as a leading figure of the Islamic Da'wa Party. Three years later (December 1974) five religious scholars and Islamic activists were executed by his henchmen. Saddam's barbaric practices reached climax in 1980, following the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Ayatullah Mohammad Baqir Al Sadr, the most leading intellectual scholar of his time was martyred with his sister on the orders of Saddam Hussain. A reign of terror then followed; Saddam issued a law condemning members of the Islamic Da'wa Party, their supporters and sympathisers to death. Hundreds were summarily executed as a consequence.

Saddam Hussain was encouraged by the United States to face up to the challenge of the rising Islamic awareness, invade Iran and flout UN laws and conventions. That war lasted eight years and claimed the lives of up to half a million people. More than one million were crippled. The West failed to take a stand against that war. That led to the use of chemical

weapons against the Kurdish population of the northern town of Halabja, killing more than three thousand of them. When the war ended in 1988, the Iraqi dictator felt stronger than ever. War-hardened, and supported by the West, Saddam ordered his troops to invade Kuwait bringing down its government. That was the beginning of the end of Saddam's relations with the West. Since 1991, Iraq has been subjected to oppressive regime of sanctions that caused the death and misery of the people while the regime remained in full swing. Following the 11 September atrocities, the US decided to target Iraq; this time targeting the regime of Saddam Hussain.

The shape of post-Saddam Iraq is hard to visualise. What is certain at the moment is that it will be ruled by an American military junta who will decide its future. They will start with demilitarising the country, formulate its future policies (especially those relating to Israel, the oil and the American presence on its soil) and work out a general framework for its future government. If a new regime based on one-man-one-vote basis emerges then it may lead to a more stable Iraq. For the past eighty years, the country has been under minority rule dictated by the British, and that rule must now come to an end. Federal or otherwise, Iraq can rebuild itself if it is allowed to function freely and without foreign intervention. A stable system employing democratic practices, respecting freedom and acting in accordance with the will of people will undoubtedly lead to a powerful country that could stand again from the ruins inflicted both by the regime of Saddam Hussain and the occupying forces. In the 1991 war, more than 85,000 tons of bombs were dropped on Iraq, and this time it is estimated that the bombing would be on a larger scale. To bomb a country almost to oblivion could not be justified. While the removal of Saddam Hussain's regime is a welcome news to the Iraqis, the cost has to be proportional. The next few weeks and months will be critical to the shaping of the future of this country which has a great human and economic potential. Iraq is perhaps the only country capable of standing up to Israel, a prospect that has now been compromised by the invasion of the American and British forces. Rebuilding the country will be a major task, especially with the extent of human suffering resulting from the latest war and the decades of neglect and sanctions. The emergence of a democratic Iraq will be a welcome development in a region that has been under despotic rule for a long time. Bahrain is a place which is anxious to see how Iraq develops. If a regime based on the majority rule emerges, the people of Bahrain will be the first to celebrate. Other countries in the Gulf are equally anxious for the end of the suffering of the Iraqi people. The only thing that could offer a partial justification for the price of war is the emergence of a representative government based on consensus, one-man-one-vote basis and respect for the rights of the various ethnic and religious groups. If that happens, the whole people of the region will start to breathe freedom which they cherish so much.

Bahrain's people express their anti-war feelings

Demonstrations against the US-led war on Iraq continued throughout the month. Students, organisations and societies participated in almost daily protests that converged on the American embassy in Manama. Bahrain serves as the main base for the US fifth fleet in the Gulf, and the government is considered by the US as one of the coalition partners in the ongoing war. Some of the demonstrations were met by harsh reaction from the government troops who fired tear gas and used heavy-handed tactics to disperse demonstrators. In an anti-US demonstration a year ago, a young Bahraini man, Mohammad Jumaa, was martyred by rubber bullets used by the troops. Another young man, Jaffar Makki, suffered serious injuries and passed away last month. In one of the recent demonstrations, the young people exploded cylinders containing Propane gas. The explosion shook the ground but caused no material damage. During the popular uprising few years ago, demonstrators adopted this means to attract attention to their political and social demands. American citizens have been advised to take more precautions to avoid being targeted by some groups. Meanwhile, three of the five people arrested few weeks ago on suspicion of planning to carry out terrorist activities against US interests have been freed, but have been warned that they

may be re-arrested if new evidence against them emerged. It was alleged that the group had links with Al Qafeda and was planning violent attacks against western interests. After examining the evidence available to the prosecutors, a local judge ordered the release of the three suspects.

Students of the University of Bahrain issued a new statement condemning the war against Iraq and demanding an immediate cessation of hostilities. The Friday prayers leaders were also unanimous in calling for an end to the war against Iraq.

A negative phenomenon has recently been observed. Irresponsible elements have targeted Kuwaitis studying at the Gulf University as well as one official at the Kuwaitis Investment Office. These attacks appear to be deliberate attempts to undermine the anti-war protestors and send the wrong message to the authorities in Kuwait. Opposition groups, including Al Wefaq, have issued a strong statement calling on the people to refrain from attacks on the guests of Bahrain. The Kuwaitis were themselves the victims of Saddam Hussein's aggression on their land in 1990. The zeal of the youth taking part in anti-war demonstrations in Bahrain have been widely praised by other people in the Arab world for the courage and persistence. Other people in the Gulf countries have kept their anti-war feelings to themselves, and could not

demonstrate due to the tight control exercised by the governments. For the Al Khalifa rulers of Bahrain, it has been their policy to encourage anti-US stands by the people in order to widen the wedge between them and the American policy makers. At the same time, it is not good that the young Bahrainis target the US and ignore their local affairs.

It is clear that the world has become more confused by the signals emanating from Washington. On the one hand, White House officials attempt to market their policy on the basis that they are aiming to improve the well-being of the people of Iraq, with the implicit message that democracy would follow. On the other hand they extend the full length of their arms for friendship, support and defence of dictatorships in the region as well as sheltering the Zionist occupation of Palestine. The post-war scenario in Iraq, as projected by the American war-planners has led to deep suspicions as to the nature of the American future policy in Iraq and the Gulf. While promotion of democracy is welcome, the message of a protracted military rule in Iraq is a sending worrying signs to the onlookers. No one likes to see a military occupation of Iraq despite the evils of Saddam Hussein. The Americans need to put their message across in the clearest possible terms.

The massacre of the international will

Academics talk about a number of theories as tools for transition to democracy. Of these theories is the International Intervention Theory. It entails the intervention by an international military force in a country where tyranny and oppression prevail. That force establishes law and order and institutionalises the country by placing a democratic system of government before leaving the country.

The theory presupposes that an international will exists to support such a military intervention and gives it the right legitimacy. Theoretically speaking, this legitimacy is gained through a UN approval of this force to represent the will of all nations.

The theory sounds very humane. In fact, many would applaud such an approach to human rights issues

around the world. However, in practice, the attempt to implement this theory failed to gain the most fundamental element in the equation. The present aggression against Iraq by the United States and Britain went ahead against the wish of all nations, even the weakest of them, despite the tempting offers of financial aids by the United States to these nations.

The declared strategy goes further than the geographical boundaries of Iraq to include the re-division of Middle East in accordance with the interests of the United States of America. This direct interference by the United States into the affairs of independent nations represents an unprecedented turn in the history of nations, the consequences of which can be catastrophic.

In a complete harmony with other nations, the people of Bahrain have ex-

pressed their anger and refusal of the unlawful aggression. Peaceful demonstrations and petitions continued over the past weeks, while few demonstrations regrettably went a little lose in some countries. We view this slight departure from peaceful expression as a result of the governments not representing their people in refusing the aggression against an Arab country and a UN member and by the excessive use of force to control demonstrations. The facilities given to the Americans in Arab countries are also a major cause of the people's anger.

The future of the world seems very gloomy with such repressive policies by the United States. As no consideration is given to the rest of world, security of nations is diminished and destruction and wars will be the main events of the years to come.

The message of Ashura: a loud cry against dictatorship

During the season of Ashura marking the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, the grandson of the Holy Prophet, the people of Bahrain took to the streets in religious mourning and sacrilege. The tradition has survived for hundreds of years and is seen as annual event that must be observed by the Muslims. During this year's commemorations, slogans and banners against the war in Iraq and the dictatorship in Bahrain were raised among enormous cries for reforms.

Imam Hussain was killed in Karbala, Iraq in the seventh century AD together with seventy two of his companions and relatives as they opposed the hereditary rule of the Umayyad, especially the reign of Yazid the second of the rulers of that dynasty.

For the past thirty years, the processions marking Ashura have become a platform for political demands, while the government watched the emotional show of popular power. The season has been marred by harsh governmental attacks against participants especially at periods of high political tension. During the uprising, the government troops targeted religious places in order to frighten off those taking part in the processions. It is considered one of the most effective platforms for political dissent, and has been effectively used by anti-government elements in order to strengthen people's resolve.

More religious processions are expected in the next few weeks.

The government has been trying to woo the mourners by offering some concessions and what appears to be assistance. The local TV was allowed to broadcast the processions and host some lectures on the subject. The people are aware of these attempts that aim at nullifying the generations-deep mistrust of the ruling family which has targeted the people of Bahrain in their religious rituals, their political aspirations and their demographic composition. What young people want is a decent life within a democratic framework. They are not interested in mirror-dressing tactics that have become at the centre of the "reform programme" which has proved to be a deficient step without a real impact on the welfare of the people.

One other motive for the government's "concessions" is the anxiety of the ruling family regarding the prospects of change in Iraq. A change in Baghdad that produces a democratic system will undoubtedly echo in the capitals of the Gulf countries.

It is worth pointing out that the British had supported minority rule in at least four countries in the past century: South Africa, Rhodesia, Iraq and Bahrain. The former two have not transformed into democracies based on "one-man-one-vote" basis leading to

majority rule. Iraq, possibly the strongest Arab country, has remained under the dictatorship of Saddam Hussain and his clique for the past 35 years and under minority rule for more than eight decades. Any change in the political system there will have resonance in Bahrain. Sheikh Hamad was well aware of the possibility of change in Iraq, and instead of introducing genuine change based on democratic values as envisaged by the 1973 constitution, he has embarked on superficial changes limited to the security situation. Now the pressure is mounting on him and his family either to reform or leave the scene. The removal of Saddam Hussain will remove the main reference to dictators in the region and those ruling their countries without a democratic mandate. Once the dust settles over Iraq, change will be inevitable in the region unless the US and Britain attempt to stall backtrack on their promise to prop up democracy. The "democratic partnership" promoted by Colin Powell will be tested in the Gulf and the credibility of the American claims will be put to the test. The hope is that the war on Iraq would not go in vain. In fact, security and the war on terrorism can only succeed if accompanied by promotion of democracy, respect of human rights and openness.

New book on changing the demography

A new book on the process of demographic change in the country has recently been published by a Bahraini author, Abdulla Al Moimen. It contains a lot of information on the government policy of effecting a fundamental change in the composition of the Bahrain society through a process of 'Bahrainisation' of non-Bahrainis especially those from the tribes of the Syrian desert and the Arabian peninsula. The book contains references to the changes in the law, imposed by the government to make it possible to grant Bahraini citizenship to non-Bahrainis, import thousands upon thousands of people whose loyalty to the Al Khalifa rulers could be guaranteed, and make it legal for those with Bahraini passports to have a dual nationality. Citizens of other Gulf countries would not risk abandoning their original passports because Bahrain cannot offer them a better political or economic environment. Sheikh Ham-

ad removed the constitutional articles in the 1973 constitution that prohibited Bahrainis from acquiring other nationalities. The aim is to change the demography of the country in such a way as to make it composed of small ethnic or religious groups each of

which would look for the ruler for protection. At the same time, the government has denied native Bahrainis their rights to have Bahraini passports. The opposition has documented evidence to support this including testimonies of his victims.

Torture victim harassed by a torturer

As part of the pressure on the prominent figures in the opposition, the minister of security, Abdul Aziz Atiyyat Allah Al Khalifa, a well-known torturer, summoned Abdul Wahab Hussain to warn him of involvement in political activities that the ruling family did not like. He was told that his participation in a commemorative function to be held on the sixth anniversary of the execution of Isa Qambar (25 March) was unacceptable. He was also told not to promote anti-war sentiments or anti-American feelings. Atiyyat

Allah, which is also named as the 'minister of torture' insisted that he and his colleagues who had committed acts of torture cannot be tried for what they did because Sheikh Hamad had issued Decree 56/2000 that shielded them from the rule of law. On his part, Mr Abdul Wahab Hussain, reiterated his position of continuing to demand the constitutional rights of the people and share their aspirations, agonies and history of struggle. Torturers can hide for a while but cannot escape justice.

Regime IS in disarray over Iraq policy

The regime has failed to handle the Iraqi crisis in a professional manner. Thus far, the policy has proved harmful to Bahrain's interests. Amongst others, Bahrain lost the opportunity to host an Arab summit. Also, the case has reinforced the differences between the king and premier, who hold diverse positions towards the Iraqi leadership. Moreover, the government was rebuffed when it made a bold offer for hosting Saddam Hussein. Last but not least, the authorities had underestimated the public anger over the American-led invasion of Iraq.

First, the regime blundered the opportunity to host an Arab summit, which was due to take place in Bahrain for the first time in the country's history. The king, Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, announced the decision not to host the gathering during a trip to Washington in February. Many observers make a connection between the trip and the announcement and believe that the regime heeded an American request. The meeting was then held in the form of an emergency summit in Egypt though under Bahrain's chairmanship. But even here, king Hamad could not impress the world with his poor management skills of the summit. For example, he failed to intervene in the right time to avert verbal quarrel between heads of delegations of Saudi Arabia and Libya.

Second, prime minister Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa and king Hamad had revealed different positions with respect to dealing with the Iraqi leadership. The monarch has been making unfriendly comments towards the Iraqi regime notably during his visit to the US. He had censured the Iraqi leadership, charging it of failing to take concrete steps to avoid the crisis. The king's position contradicted the stance taken by the premier. While heading Bahrain's delegation for the non-aligned summit in Malaysia, Sheikh Khalifa met senior Iraqi officials. Sheikh Khalifa was photographed exchanging candid talks with Iraqi officials, notably vice-president Taha Ramadan. People close to the king, Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, say that the monarch was irritated with Sheikh Khalifa's behaviour during the summit. The episode has demonstrated one more time the presence of two foreign policy agendas for Bahrain, one held by the king and the other by the premier.

Third, in mid March, only days prior

to outbreak of hostilities, the government offered to host Saddam Hussein as a way out of the crisis. However, the Iraqi leadership has not even responded to the Bahraini gesture. Some believe that the premier stands behind the offer. Traditionally, Sheikh Khalifa has maintained friendly ties with the Iraqi leadership, and had frequently visited Iraq in the past. Still, Bahrainis were stunned by the government move and asked whether the authorities were in position to refuse handing over Saddam Hussein to the US, if pressed. The public has not accepted the move mainly because the regime had not bothered consulting the political societies, let alone the so-called National Assembly. Overall, the US and fellow Gulf countries decided not to endorse the offer and many wondered of the regime's motives behind the move.

Fourth, the regime decided to send troops to Kuwait without consulting the concerned parties. In fact, the regime has endorsed the war without engaging in consultation with National Assembly, which would have voted favoured anyway. The government controls the assembly, as the main political societies notably al-Wefaq, boycotted the October 2002 elections. Voice of Bahrain has learned that some 1,200 troops were deployed in Kuwait, to help defend that country in case of Iraqi attacks. More importantly, this newsletter has learned that 98 soldiers refused to take part in the military deployment in Kuwait. The military establishment would most likely court martial the deserters after the war. Military sources have disclosed to Voice of Bahrain that some soldiers refused to take part in the Kuwaiti deployment reflecting their belief, namely not being convinced in the war. Moreover, the military has sent al-Sabha, Bahrain's only frigate to Kuwait. But unconfirmed reports have suggested that the frigate has encountered a technical problem before reaching the Kuwaiti territorial waters, rendering it not useful. The US had sold this retired frigate to Bahrain at a special price.

Demise of a scholar

One of the leading scholars, Sheikh Sulaiman Al Madani, passed away on 25 March 2003. He was in his seventies and had studied in the holy city of Najaf in Iraq. He had controversial political stands with regards to the democratic struggle in the country especially in the past 25 years.

Furthermore, it has emerged that some 20 Bahraini soldiers had illegally left their camp in Kuwait and returned home without approval from the military establishment. These absconders run the risk of being court marshaled when the war is over. Worse yet, unconfirmed reports have suggested that Bahrain might eventually discontinue its military presence in Kuwait, as the deployment proves increasingly unpopular. Fifth, the regime was stunned by the extent of public anger of the war, expressed mainly in the form of demonstrations. Hundreds of people, mostly youths, have staged frequent demonstrations outside the US embassy in Manama. And for the first time, demonstrators staged a rally outside the British embassy located opposite the government house. The protestors included students from the public and private schools as well as students of the University of Bahrain. Consequently, the American and British embassies decided to indefinitely close their diplomatic missions.

For their parts, security forces used rubber shots, tear gas as well as beating by batons for the purpose of dispersing the demonstrators. This led the authorities seeking assistance from influential figures rather than members of the National Assembly to help disperse the protesters. For example, Sheikh Ali Salman, leader of al-Wefaq political society, accepted to mediate and help calm the situation. In retrospect, al-Wefaq boycotted the parliamentary elections after the monarch unilaterally altered the 1973 constitution without referring to the constitutional mechanism. Amongst others, the king granted the appointed consultative council legislative rights on par with the elected body, which together comprise the National Assembly.

The experience in dealing with the Iraqi crisis has put on display the differences between the regime and the public. The authorities had not bothered consulting the National Assembly and opposition groups. Clearly, the regime opted for endorsing military intervention without taking into account the popular opposition for such a move. Strangely enough, the move was not even popular within the military establishment; additionally, the affair disclosed the differences between the king and the premier over the issue. All in all, the regime has failed to impress the Bahraini people in its handling of the Iraqi crisis.