

Middle East Policy

Some Alternative Views

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On 24 January 2007, the House of Commons debated 'Iraq and the wider Middle East'. Tony Blair absented himself, even though his government had not previously initiated such a debate during the several years since it invaded Iraq. This scarcely troubled Margaret Beckett, the Government's spokesman. Wiser voices, however, did speak up. We reprint here three contributions to the debate from widely different perspectives.

I

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North) (Labour): ... The war in Iraq has cost the lives of at least 500,000 people since 2003. The Saddam Hussein regime cost the lives of many tens of thousands of Iraqis before that. My right hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) was right to highlight the horrors of Saddam Hussein's regime. A small number of us, including my right hon. Friend, opposed it from the 1980s onwards, when the House was busy turning a blind eye to arms sales, oil deals and all the other support that was given to that regime because it suited the west to support Iraq in the war against Iran.

However, I differ from my right hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley about where we go from here. It cannot be said that the position in Iraq is better now than in the latter days of Saddam Hussein. As I said, more than 500,000 have already been killed. According to a BBC website, 1.7 million Iraqis have been forced immediately into exile and all the neighbouring countries are threatening to close their borders.

Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead) (Labour): I want to correct my hon. Friend. I saw the BBC website, and it said that 2 million Iraqis had fled the country. The figure of 1.7 million related to internally displaced people. The United Nations says that another million could be displaced before the end of this year.

Jeremy Corbyn: My hon. Friend is right; I stand corrected. This means that almost 4 million Iraqis have either become internally displaced or fled the country. The lucky ones have managed to get out of the region and into western Europe. In Jordan, Syria and all the neighbouring countries, there are Iraqis living a desperate existence, yet they too were lucky enough to get out.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Labour): Is it not therefore an absolute disgrace that this Government are still deporting Iraqi asylum seekers from this country?

Jeremy Corbyn: My hon. Friend has made a good point. My constituency has often welcomed asylum seekers from conflicts all around the world. The Iraqi asylum seekers there include those who came during the Saddam regime and those who have come since. Interestingly, those who fled persecution under the Saddam regime did not, for the most part, support the war, and they certainly do not support the continued presence of British and American forces in Iraq. They recognise that the continued presence of those forces is creating further problems, rather than presenting a solution to them.

News was leaked out last week of a proposed new oil law that the Iraqi Parliament is to be invited to approve in a few weeks' time. This is a mysterious piece of legislation, and I hope that the Minister will be able to throw some light on the matter when he responds to the debate. Apparently, the drafters of the new law were not in Iraq but in Washington, and they were assisted by people in London. The proposed law bears an uncanny resemblance to the British-imposed oil law in Iran in 1952, after the shah was imposed on the people of that country. BP and other oil companies made massive amounts of money from that arrangement in the succeeding years. There is deep suspicion that the oil law that is now being proposed for Iraq is the reward for the invasion, and that it will involve the privatisation of oil production and the sale to certain oil companies of cheap oil that ought to be for the benefit of the Iraqi people.

Ms Dawn Butler (Brent, South) (Labour): The proposed oil law is indeed a bit suspicious. Does my hon. Friend also share my concern as to whether the big conglomerates such as BP and Shell will invest in the necessary infrastructure and in fair wages for normal Iraqi citizens?

Jeremy Corbyn: That is a legitimate concern, and I hope that the Minister will be able to throw some light on the future of this oil law. I also hope that he will recognise that the Iraqi people ought to be able to maintain public ownership not only of the oil but of oil production and oil sales, which is the crucial part of the arrangement.

Ms Katy Clark (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Labour): Is my hon. Friend aware of a meeting of Iraqi trade leaders that took place in Jordan in December, at which senior trade unionists discussed this proposal? They took the view that this oil law would not be in the interests of the Iraqi people. They also believed that that would be the view of the Iraqi people. Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be inappropriate for 15 or 20-year oil contracts to be signed while the country is still under occupation?

Jeremy Corbyn: I agree with my friend; it would be illegal to do that, because Britain and the United States are, in law, occupying forces. They do not therefore have the legal authority to make fundamental changes to what is happening in that country. Those are the terms of the Hague convention, and that ought to be understood.

Mr. Robert N. Wareing (Liverpool, West Derby) (Labour): Has my hon. Friend seen the draft law, in which 75 per cent of the profits will go to companies such as Shell, BP and Exxon? This was the real reason for the war, not weapons

of mass destruction or regime change.

Jeremy Corbyn: That has become clear, and I am pleased that my hon. Friends have made those points, as, clearly, the debate is limited in time.

Last night, President Bush gave the State of the Union address. He was not the gung-ho President Bush of 2002, whose axis of evil speech promised war all over the world. He was a President desperately trying to find some way forward. He was offered a way out by the Iraq Study Group, which he seemed to reject, and has now gone for the bizarre option of putting in more troops to try to control the situation.

President Bush will be for ever remembered as the President who got bogged down in the war in Iraq, just as President Johnson is remembered as the President who was bogged down in the war in Vietnam. He knows what the opinion polls in the United States are telling him; the Prime Minister knows what opinion polls in this country are saying. There is worldwide condemnation of the war, the strategy behind it and the crazy thinking that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle) pointed out, leads inexorably to yet more wars.

Is the United States now planning seriously for a war against Iran and the conflagration that that will cause all over the region? Members of the House have a duty to try to tell our own Government about public opinion in this country. We must also give them a message that, yes, there is enormous opposition to the war in Iraq, but if they tried to get involved in a war against Iran, the opposition would be even greater, not because we support the Iranian regime, but because we do not want Iranian people killed.

... I want to conclude on the situation in Palestine, which also relates to the Middle East.

During the Christmas-new year recess, I visited Palestine for a week, of my own volition and at my own cost. I did not go to many meetings or meet many organisations; I met one or two people. I spent most of the time just trying to travel about, from Jerusalem to Jericho, Bethlehem, Ramallah, Abu Dis and some other places. I reflected on what it must be like for young Palestinians brought up surrounded by armed occupation and checkpoints, regular incursions and bombings, shootings and killings, whose houses are now surrounded by a massive concrete wall, with watchtowers looming down photographing their every move. That is the life and the atmosphere in which young Palestinians are growing up.

Bethlehem, a beautiful town if ever there was one, with a wonderful history and setting, is now ruined, wrecked and surrounded by walls and watchtowers as the population become prisoners. Jericho is cut off from the rest of the west bank. The road from Jerusalem down to Jericho used to be a beautiful journey through those wonderful hills where one saw Bedouin tribespeople tending their goats and sheep. It is now a superhighway with spur roads going off it joining settlements.

The message from Israel is: settlements go on, the conflict goes on, the occupation goes on. Meanwhile, 70 per cent of the Palestinian people are without jobs and hope: desperation is the order of the day. If we are serious about peace and justice for the Palestinians, we will exert real pressure—for instance, by

lifting the European Union-Israel trade agreement—to make Israel start to respect the lives, wishes and hopes of the ordinary people of Palestine. Because it is a cause that is dear to the hearts of people all over the region, as well as to many other people, there are peace and human rights groups in Israel that also recognise that. The current strategy is not a road to peace; it is a road to occupation and, in the long run, to disaster. Peace comes through justice and understanding the causes of conflict ...

II

Sir Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton) (Labour): The last words of the right hon. Member for Gordon (Malcolm Bruce) demonstrate the centrality of the Palestinian issue in the whole of the Middle East. Anyone who denies that has only to remember the final words of Saddam Hussein before he went to his gruesome and disgusting death – he talked about Palestine. Even in those last moments, as he went to his death, he knew that his martyrdom would be centred around talking about Palestine.

In August 2002 – five months before the Iraqi war broke out – the hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Johnson) commissioned me to write an article in which I said that I would, with whatever reluctance, vote with the Government if there were a war against Iraq, but that I very much hoped that there would not be a war against Iraq, and I warned of many of the events that have taken place as a result of that invasion. However, I also said in that article:

‘I think it would be a blessing for the world if Saddam were removed from office and replaced by a regime that rejoined the world community.’

The problem is that Iraq does not have a regime that has rejoined the world community. Its conduct, and the recent executions that have taken place, demonstrate that.

Leaders of the West hailed the democracy involved in the election of the Iraqi Government, but that election has resulted in a vengeful sectarian gang that is hounding its religious opponents and not seeking to unite the country. It is also odd that we welcome the result of democracy in Iraq but refuse to recognise democracy in Palestine. However repugnant the Hamas movement is – and I find Hamas deeply repugnant – its victory was at least as valid as that of the current Iraqi Government, and, I might say, it was a good deal more valid than the way in which President Bush came to office in 2000.

As the right hon. Member for Gordon pointed out, the situation in the Palestinian territories is unacceptable. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, who has done everything that any human being can do to obtain a settlement. It is true that he is obstructed by conflict among the Palestinians, but he is obstructed above all by recalcitrance among the Israelis, who are literally getting away with murder: the killing of hundreds and hundreds of Palestinians, thousands since the second *intifada* broke out; the deaths of Israelis that have followed as a result of the Israeli action; the construction of a wall that has been

declared illegal by the International Court of Justice deep into Palestinian territory, not so much to protect Israelis as to protect illegal Jewish settlements deep into the Palestinian territories; the deaths of Palestinians, of women and children; and the continuing construction, even in the past weeks, of illegal settlements in the occupied territories. I am baffled by those who pay tribute to the Israeli release of tax revenues. When a thief returns a small fraction of what he has stolen, I do not regard that as an admirable act; I regard it as inadequate and unacceptable.

When the Israelis were launching their war against Lebanon last summer, any idiot warned of the consequences – and, indeed, I did so. Hezbollah is mainly intact. Its members are the heroes of the Middle East. The three Israeli soldiers whose kidnapping was the pretext for the Israeli invasion of Lebanon – as it is for the continuing Israeli attacks on Gaza – remain in captivity. What has been the result? The ineffable chief of staff of the Israeli army has resigned.

The Prime Minister of Israel, who was a lousy mayor of Jerusalem before he became Prime Minister, has an approval rating of 14 per cent. Amir Peretz, Israel's Minister of Defence, has destroyed the once great Labour Party that founded Israel, and which was responsible for its democracy and pioneering and all the other things that I was proud to support as a Labour friend of Israel. Too late, Israel says that it is going to get rid of him, later this year.

I find it deeply demeaning that the Israeli public, with their 14 per cent approval rating of Ehud Olmert, have turned against the war not because they believe that it was wrong, but because it failed. However illegal and lethal it was, they would have continued to support it. There is a long history among my Jewish people of doing, in effect, what the Israelites did when Moses went up Mount Sinai. They were impatient for his return, and they started to worship the golden calf. The sad fact is that although Israelis can be great and constructive and idealistic, they can also be their own worst enemies. Frankly, who needs Hezbollah when they have got Olmert and Peretz to damage that once great country?

The sad fact is that the Israelis are going to be allowed to career on in this way. President Bush and the neocons will not exercise any pressure whatsoever on Israel, but nor will the Democrats, who – be it Hillary Clinton or anybody else – depend on Jewish votes in key states.

I say what I said at the outset. There is of course a mosaic of issues in the Middle East, some of which are related and others not, but in Afghanistan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Syria – to which I paid a private visit only a few weeks ago – Palestine is either the issue or the pretext for all the aggression taking place in the Middle East. Although I deplore the loathsome regime in Iran, I find it somewhat baffling that we should condemn any possibility of its gaining nuclear weapons – I am against its doing so – while accepting the fact that Israel, which does not subscribe to the Non-Proliferation Treaty, has had them for many years. Somehow, that is all right.

I have voted with my Labour Whip for all the 37 years that I have sat in this House of Commons, and I tell my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench that any military action against Iran or any motion in this House endorsing it

would provoke my first vote against the Labour Whip since I was elected in June 1970.

III

Mr. George Galloway (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Respect): When I was his warm-up act, I used to describe the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Sir Gerald Kaufman) as the best Foreign Secretary we never had, and his speech this evening showed why. Indeed, an alternative Administration of all the talents became clear on the Labour Benches, including the right hon. Gentleman's friends the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Frank Dobson), and the hon. Members for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn) and for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle). How much stronger the Labour Party's position would be in the opinion polls today if those were the men sitting around the Cabinet table, rather than the men and women who are.

What a contrast there was between those shafts of light and the myopia displayed by the Foreign Secretary. So rose-tinted were her glasses that she had even spotted the first elections in Saudi Arabia. As one who follows events in the Arab world closely, I must tell the House that I missed the first elections in Saudi Arabia, probably the un-freest, most undemocratic and most anti-democratic country on earth. So keen was the Foreign Secretary to describe the success of Anglo-American policy in the Arab world that she prayed in aid a grant to the youth parliament in Bahrain.

But those were not the most foolish of the things that the Foreign Secretary said in her long speech. She talked about supporting the Government and people of Lebanon. Well, let us split that proposition. She was not much help to the Government of Lebanon when its Prime Minister was weeping on television and begging for a ceasefire, and when the British and American Governments alone in the world were refusing, indeed blocking, any attempts to demand an immediate cessation of the Israeli bombardment. Worse, she was not much help to the Government or the people of Lebanon when British airports were being used for the trans-shipment of American weapons to Israel that were raining down death and destruction on the very people of Lebanon whom she now claims to stand beside. But, of course, that was code for saying that she does not support the one million demonstrators in the square in Beirut who are demanding democracy.

The Foreign Secretary describes the Government of Lebanon as a democratic Government. If the Minister will listen, I can educate him. There is no democratic Government in Lebanon. The Minister should know that. If there were a democracy in Lebanon, Hassan Nasrallah would be the President, because he would get the most votes. But of course he cannot be the President, because you have to be a Christian to be the President, and you have to be a Sunni to be the Prime Minister, and you have to be a Shi'ite to be the Speaker. What they have in Lebanon is precisely the opposite of democracy. It is a sectarian building-block Government that they have in Lebanon, and moreover one based on a census that is more than 50 years out of date. If those one million demonstrators had been in

Ukraine or Belarus or Georgia, they would be described as the orange revolution, or given some other epithet – perhaps even ‘the cedar revolution’.

So myopic was the Foreign Secretary that she talked about the peace process in Palestine and refused to condemn the theft, as the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton put it – he used the word – of \$900 million, stolen from the Palestinian Authority. The right hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Jane Kennedy), without a hint of irony, advanced the extraordinary proposition that we are fighting for democracy in Iraq, while we can steal the money of the Palestinian Administration in the occupied territories because the people voted for a Government whom Olmert, Bush and Blair did not like. So myopic was the Foreign Secretary’s view that she prayed in aid an opinion poll from Basra which told us that the people had every confidence in the police – we had to send the British in to blow up a police station and kill umpteen Iraqi policemen because we said that they were about to massacre the prisoners in their jails.

The Foreign Secretary prayed in aid the Iraqi Government – a virtual Government – saying that, more importantly, the Iraqi Government do not consider that they have a civil war. Of course they do not, because there is no Iraqi Government. As the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton put it, we have installed a gang of warlords in power in Baghdad, the heads of competing militias, some of them at war with our own soldiers in the south of Iraq. It is not a Government, but Martin Scorsese’s ‘Gangs of New York’ that we have put in charge in Baghdad. That is not my concept. That is the concept of the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton.

So myopic was the Foreign Secretary that she had her finger out and wagging at Iran, warning it of what it must do, or must not do in terms of nuclear weapons. She is the Foreign Secretary of a Government who are about to spend £75 billion on our own nuclear weapons, who declare themselves the best friend of Israel, which has hundreds of nuclear weapons and refuses to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and who say nothing about Pakistan, a military dictatorship acquiring nuclear weapons. It would make you laugh if it did not make you cry.

Most serious of all was the extent to which the Foreign Secretary sought to lull us to sleep walk into a coming conflict with Iran. Invited by one of her colleagues to describe, as the former Foreign Secretary had, an attack on Iran as inconceivable, she refused, preferring instead the formulation that no one is contemplating it. But they are contemplating it. Israel has a war plan carefully worked out to do it. As we know from the journalism of Seymour Hersh, the greatest of all American journalists, who brought us the stories from Vietnam, American generals have to the nth degree worked out an attack upon Iran.

The Foreign Secretary says that we stand by our soldiers. We stand by them so much that we pay them so little. We had to give them a Christmas bonus to make up their wages. Their families are claiming means-tested benefits and living in houses that you would not put a dangerous dog in. We send them, ill clad, ill equipped, ill armed, without armour, on a pack of lies into war after war after war.

Let me invite the House to contemplate this and see if I am as right about this

as I was about Iraq four years ago. If a finger is raised against Iran by Israel or the United States, the first people to pay the price will be the 7,000 young men and women of the British armed forces that we have stationed in the south of Iraq, where Iran, thanks to us, is now top dog. If Members want to know what that will look like, think about the film 'Zulu', but without the happy ending. That is how irresponsible our Government are. They are part of an axis that is contemplating a war against a country that we have made powerful in a place where we have our soldiers standing in a thin red line in the sand.

For the moment, the trial of Tony Blair merely takes place on Channel 4 television. The day will come, and it is coming soon, when a real trial of Tony Blair will take place in a real court.