

THE DAILY STAR

LEBANON

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Blair, Bush deserve a statue in Baghdad

🕒 Jul. 11, 2016 | 12:08 AM

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Other than some useful quotes from governmental sources otherwise unavailable to the public, there is nothing really new in the Chilcot Report. The Iraq War suffers from overanalysis, and time has not assuaged passions around it. I do not claim to be immune from passion's obfuscating shadows in a matter so important in our life. So point one: Whoever reads the rather turgid Chilcot Report will remain passionately attached to the demonization of the Blair-Bush policy, starting with an American president who owes his job to having been the one minor public figure, as a state senator in Illinois, to have stood up firmly against U.S. policy before the war. I am on the equally passionate side of those who wanted Saddam Hussein out of power, and continue to be grateful to George Bush for freeing Iraqis from his dictatorship. I even tweeted, in the passion that the Chilcot Report rekindled across the planet, that "for the record, Blair and Bush deserve, like Clinton in Kosovo, a statue in downtown Baghdad."

Not at any cost, and not without many doubts. I had demonstrated in February 2003 against the war on the streets of Brussels, and in good conscience. Still, the Iraqis deserved to be rid of a uniquely brutal ruler, and they simply could not do it on their own. Just imagine Saddam or Uday Hussein in power in 2016, for they would still be running Iraq without Bush's war. Look no further than at their closest dynastic clones in power, the Assads of Damascus. I invite my Syrian friends, and the hundreds of millions who support them across the world, to replace Saddam or Uday with Hafez and Bashar, and see whether they wouldn't erect a statue in downtown Damascus for a leader who would rid them of their living nightmare.

Things could have turned differently in Iraq, of course. First there was the march to war, bungled in Washington by choosing WMD (weapons of mass destruction) over the argument Bush really believed in, an argument best put in some of Blair's Chilcot quotes: Saddam "is a monster." "His regime is brutal and inhumane." "His departure would free up the region." The drive to oust Saddam was also bungled by the supporters of Saddam, most prominently Chirac and Putin at the time, who did not want him gone and pussyfooted around arguments of international law to keep the WMD inspectors working forever while Saddam firmly remained in power.

With a group of friends, in The Daily Star, and in An-Nahar, and in Reuters, and on CNN, we had publicized our own alternative plan, back in February 2003, dubbed the Democratic Iraq Initiative. We insisted on the removal of Saddam as the archdictator of the Middle East, and even drafted a Security Council resolution delegitimizing a man who had breached so many Security Council resolutions; and we asked the U.N. and the Arab League to deploy human rights monitors during the transition to assist democracy in a society ravaged by 40 years of dictatorship. The initiative found its way to the heart of the Pentagon in early March. It was, again, the European supporters of Saddam, aided by the shortsightedness of some U.S. officials, who derailed it. WMD was the wrong argument. But even on WMD, I am puzzled to date. A 2004 quote of Jack Straw in Chilcot addresses it well. Why on earth did Saddam's Iraq "behave in so self-destructive a manner as to pretend that it had forbidden weaponry, when in fact it had not?" And the answer is not that elusive, for this is what dictators do. They cannot appear to be weak, because they know that their rivals, and the people at large, will exploit any weakness. A dictator never lets his guard down.

Well, an unnecessary Desert Storm 2 followed, and Saddam was out, hiding in a cave where he belonged. Many blame, as does Chilcot, the management postwar, rather than the war itself. Could it have been different? Of course it could have been otherwise. There was a structural matter, the issue of the occupation. The U.N. Secretariat, in insidious revenge, forced the term "occupation" on the situation. Iraq, like Germany after 1945, was "occupied." The lawyers in New York and in D.C. could simply not see the difference between a welcoming Iraqi population, traumatized yet liberated, and a Nazi society supporting Hitler to the very end. To talk sectarian, the Shiite and Kurdish Iraqis were with Bush, over 80 percent of the population. No one fought the invasion, and it took less than three weeks from the Kuwait border to the ousting of Saddam. But then liberation was officially turned into "occupation," which in the Middle East is known chiefly through the horrible prism of what the Israeli government has done to the Palestinians relentlessly since 1967, after evicting most of them in 1948. Still, there was an honest general in Jay Garner, who was mostly preoccupied with getting an Iraqi government in place, rather than him ruling over Iraqis. The occupier-in-chief came later, in the form of an ambitiously ignorant acolyte of Henry Kissinger called Jerry Bremer, who took himself seriously as the boss of 30 million Iraqis he was supposed to have empowered. Bad luck, really, as often happens in history.

This also could have turned differently. I was in Beirut when the phone rang, a few days after Baghdad had been freed from Saddam. It was the Pentagon. Paul Wolfowitz was asking if I would go to Baghdad to help organize a fluid opposition into a government. I declined. I have often wondered since whether a positive answer would have made any difference.

In all likelihood, I would have ended like the unlucky U.N. envoy, Sergio de Mello. Maybe not. The point is that Chilcot is overall wrong both for the march to war, and the postwar management. It ignored the Iraqi side of history, so it missed the forest for the trees. Good old orientalism, in which locals are passive witnesses, and I had real trouble finding a single Iraqi voice over 180 pages of Chilcot's Executive Summary. When I briefly met Bush for a photo op during my presidential campaign in 2006, I thought hard about what I could tell him in a few seconds. Finally, I settled for "I am running for president of Lebanon, and I want to thank you for taking the lid off Arab dictatorships." I stick with this reading of Bush's legacy in Iraq and the Middle East at large, as well as Blair's. They removed the worst dictator of the region. We followed in the open tracks in Beirut in 2005, in Tehran in 2009, and continue to work hard at it, in Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Egypt, Turkey. Not in Iraq. In Iraq, while there is chaos, I am confident it will get better over the coming decade, because there is no dictatorship. As to the provocative phrase, "Bush deserves a statue in downtown Baghdad," it is not really mine. I heard it in Najaf last year.

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11/07/2016