

FROM IRAQ TO UKRAINE TO...? WAR AS A PRICE NOT WORTH PAYING

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Welcome to this event to mark – and mourn – the illegal invasion and reckless war of choice against Iraq launched by the United States (and a small coalition of those willing to act as accomplices to that crime) on March 20, 2003. The anniversary comes as the “folly of war” – in the words of UN Secretary-General António Guterres, appealing in vain for a ‘global ceasefire’ during the pandemic – is again on display in Ukraine, as it has been in deadlier but far less publicized conflicts in Ethiopia, Yemen, Democratic Republic of Congo, and elsewhere.

Peace Quest condemns the Russian invasion of Ukraine as unequivocally as it condemned the American invasion of Iraq. Just as we condemned the massive human rights abuses of US forces in Iraq, including officially-sanctioned torture, we condemn the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by Russian forces and on the orders of the Russian leadership, as well as all human rights violations by Ukraine, most egregiously the blatantly illegal law rendering all males between 18 and 60 subject to conscription: banning them from leaving the country, denying any right to conscientious objection, jailing them if they refuse to ‘serve’ (kill and/or die for the state). We also believe the fighting should not be fueled by western ‘weapons, weapons, weapons’ in the vain quest for ‘victory’; that a ceasefire is urgently needed to stop the increasingly senseless, WW1-style slaughter, and allow time and space for talks on a workable (if, yes, imperfect) settlement. And we echo the warning of Yurii Sheliashenko, Executive Secretary of the Ukrainian Pacifist Movement, issued on the anniversary of the Russian invasion, that “today the blood is shedding in Ukraine. But current plans to wage the war for years and years...may turn the whole planet into a battlefield.”

Today, though, I want to concentrate on the tragedy of Iraq; on one of the most unjust (and unsuccessful) wars of all, one whose long shadows continue to deepen, including in Ukraine.

In the months before the US invasion, Peace Quest – formed a few months after the 9/11 terror attacks (with which Iraq had nothing to do) – played its small part in a series of ever-larger protests in Cape Breton (repeated across the province and country) demanding that the government of Canada resist US pressure to support, with blood and treasure, its mad adventure.

Without such ‘pressure from the street,’ I am not sure Ottawa would have come down on the right side of history and law: but just two days before the invasion, Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chretien finally assured the House of Commons that “if military action proceeds without a new resolution of the Security Council, Canada will not participate.”

The war was ‘justified,’ the Republican Administration of George W. Bush maintained, because of the ‘clear and present danger’ posed by Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Yet what the Security Council *had* previously agreed (unanimously) was that UN weapons inspectors should

continue scouring the country for *evidence* of biological, chemical, or nuclear weapons or weapons programmes; evidence they were close to determining was clearly *not* present. For sure, in the 1980s Iraq *did* possess chemical weapons (thanks to who, we will see later), and ran both a biological and nuclear weapons research programme; but what the inspectors in 2003 were confirming was that after Iraq's defeat in the Gulf War of 1990-91 all of its WMD stocks, equipment, and facilities had been – under watchful international eyes – disarmed, dismantled and disabled.

At the time I was editing a UK-based journal called *Disarmament Diplomacy*, and our headline for the April/May 2003 edition ran: **INSPECTIONS SWEEP ASIDE BY WAR**. I'd like to read a few of the quotes we compiled from leaders aghast that the world system – the 'rules-based international order' – was about to be rocked by a patently spurious "war of disarmament" (the ironic phrase of German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer) waged by the world's most-heavily armed nation, in proud possession of a world-ending nuclear arsenal.

The war in fact harmed the cause of non-proliferation and disarmament immeasurably. North Korea, for example – which had not then crossed the atomic Rubicon – vowed on March 29, 2003, to "avoid the miserable fate" of Iraq, by refusing the "demand raised by the imperialists" that it abandon its WMD programmes.

Most fatefully, Russia, already appalled by NATO's decision to expand east (despite solemn assurances it would *not*) – and reeling from a decade of decay, social chaos, and Western-directed 'casino capitalism' after the collapse of the Soviet Union – began its decisive turn from détente, renouncing the vision of the last Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, for the construction of a radically demilitarized, completely denuclearized, post-bloc 'common European home'. The US invasion raises, Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov declared on April 1, the question of "precedent": after Iraq, perhaps "Syria, then Iran, then North Korea, and then...what?" Given, he continued, that "the international system is coming apart at the seams, we are drawing some military-political conclusions, because this conflict makes us remember the words of (Tsar) Alexander III who said that Russia has only two reliable allies – the Army and the Navy."

In similar vein, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahatir Mohamed suggested that "maybe after the attacks on Iraq," America's "next target will be Iran and other nations like Sudan and Libya," as part of a "war to dominate the world – i.e.," he added, "the chromatically-different world." Amr Moussa, Secretary-General of the Arab League, declared it "a sad day for all Arabs that Iraq and its people should be subjected to a military strike which will...take no account of civilians". "Do you think," Moussa asked, "that democracy will come to Iraq on a B-52? Or on the back of a tank? Or with an armoured division?"

In truth, the attack was no more a "war for democracy" than it was a "war of disarmament." "Since the 1960s," as Iraqi-born Professor Zainab Saleh recently wrote for the Costs of War Project at Brown University, "the US has treated Iraq as essential to its own economic and geopolitical interests," a calculus prompting a string of "interventions" with "devastating costs and consequences". In fact, the root of much of this evil can be traced to the CIA-orchestrated overthrow, seventy years ago, of Iran's popular, progressive, democratically-elected Prime Minister, Mohammed Mossadegh, after he nationalized the oil industry, previously run by the 'Anglo-Iranian Oil Company' (i.e. by Britain). Mossadegh was replaced by a pliant dictator, the Shah. Five years later, 1958, the British-backed monarchy in Iraq was replaced by a Republic, which in 1959

withdrew from an anti-communist ‘security’ pact with Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, and the UK. In 1961, Prime Minister Abdul Karim Qasim assumed partial control – seen as a prelude to nationalization – of the Iraqi Petroleum Company. Two years later, seizing on the regime’s increasing unpopularity and authoritarianism, the CIA helped the opposition Ba’ath Party topple and execute Qasim, and then slaughter – on the basis of lists “provided by US intelligence” – thousands of actual or suspected communists and other ‘leftists,’ imprisoning and torturing thousands more.

In 1979, the Shah was overthrown, an anti-communist but also anti-American Islamic Republic established, and Saddam Hussein became the latest Ba’ath party dictator in Iraq. In Washington, Saddam immediately became a “strongman we can trust” – a “countervailing force,” as Professor Saleh says, “to the new regime” in Tehran. In September 1980, Iraq invaded Iran, sparking an epically brutal, ultimately indecisive eight-year war. In 1983, as the Iraqi war effort faltered, the Republican Reagan Administration dispatched a special envoy to Baghdad: Donald Rumsfeld, who twenty years later, as Defense Secretary, directed the overthrow of a regime he’d done so much to prop up – for as Professor Saleh notes, “as a result” of his visit the US “granted Iraq millions of dollars in trade credits,” sold it “weapons through Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia,” and “encouraged European countries to sell weapons” too. And they did, including the West German companies that played a crucial role in helping Saddam acquire the “chemical weapons” he soon and often used against Iran, and later against Iraqi Kurds, most notoriously in the 1988 Halabja Massacre. In an Orwellian press release in, appropriately, 1984, the Iraqi government declared that, quote, “*the invaders* should know that for every harmful insect there is an insecticide...and Iraq possesses this annihilation insecticide.”

The West was mightily embarrassed (by the war crimes it aided and abetted) but only turned on Saddam when in 1990 he invaded Kuwait, a nation he was – after his ruinous war – ruinously indebted to, and which insisted on dramatically increasing oil production, thus lowering prices and Iraqi revenues. The resulting attack on Iraq – the US-led, UN-backed *Operation Desert Storm* – achieved its objective of expelling Iraq from Kuwait at catastrophic cost, not just to Iraq’s largely-conscript army but the general population. To quote Professor Saleh one last time, the assault “not only targeted military installments” across Iraq “but also [civilian] infrastructure, including water and sewage treatment, agricultural production and food distribution, health care, communication, and power generation.” (All quite illegal, of course, UN-authorization or not.)

Iraq was then kept on its knees – its *people* were, I mean – from 1991-2003 by a designedly indiscriminate sanctions regime, a campaign of socio-economic warfare claiming, according to UNICEF, *half a million* young lives by the mid-1990s through malnutrition, poor sanitation, and previously preventable, treatable disease. Such sanctions – ostensibly imposed to force Iraq to relinquish its supposed weapons of mass destruction – acted precisely *as* weapons of mass destruction, a bitter irony conveyed by this indelible 1996 exchange between US journalist Lesley Stahl and Democratic President Bill Clinton’s Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright:

Stahl: We have heard that a half million children have died. I mean that’s more children than died in Hiroshima. And, you know, is the price worth it?

Albright: I think this is a very hard choice, but the price – I think the price is worth it.

For most Iraqis, daily life in the nineties was a living hell, a downward spiral of indignity and disorientation. As one Iraqi woman – then a young student: or trying to be – told Professor Saleh:

My father lost everything: the building he owned, his business, our house, his two cars. ... The economic insecurity took its toll on the family relationships. We began to have a lot of fights... I was in tears many times because I wanted the bus fare and my father didn't have money... The education system collapsed, and teachers were no longer teaching...

Appallingly, worse suffering was to follow the 2003 war (trite titled *Operation Iraqi Freedom*) when the short but vicious 'Shock and Awe' campaign – killing 7,000 civilians in the first month, and again pulverizing civilian infrastructure, while wreaking grave environmental harm – was succeeded by: a shambolic occupation (incapable, for example, of preventing widespread looting of museums, libraries, and other cultural sites); a rapid collapse in security and governance triggered by the disbanding of the Iraqi army, coupled with the blanket dismissal of tens of thousands of Ba'ath party officials and administrators; and an explosion of sectarian violence and terrorism as al Qaeda (not previously present in Iraq) and a monstrous new menace, the so-called 'Islamic State in Iraq and Syria', or ISIS, filled the Void.

In 2016, thirteen years after the 'liberation', ISIS took control of Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, abandoned overnight by Iraqi 'security forces' trained (at high cost) by the Americans and British. Democratic President Barack Obama (who famously denounced the 2003 war as "dumb") ordered that Mosul be 'liberated' *At Any Cost*, to cite the title of a harrowing *Amnesty International* report on the ensuing "civilian catastrophe," which opens by quoting one resident (named, for his safety, only as 'Ayman') declaring: "Our city is in ruins. They have treated us like we are absolutely nothing."

By 'they,' he meant *both* the ISIS occupiers and the Iraqi/US forces which, as 'Mohamed' said, "shelled during night and day," hitting "so many houses"; indeed, he added, in order to 'take out' an ISIS sniper, strikes "would hit one house and also destroy the houses on either side. They killed a huge number of people." Let us zoom in, with the *Amnesty* report, on an attack launched by helicopter on January 13, 2017, described here by 'Hashem' –

I was close by at my mother's house. We were eating breakfast. At 8:15 and without warning the first rocket struck the homes, followed by two others. ... It was all over in five or ten minutes. After the last rocket landed we ran down to the scene. We were scared, but we're Arabs, and if there are dead people we must go down to them. We dug the bodies out. We pulled them out of the rubble. They were torn apart. Heads and arms had been severed. The target was an ISIS commander... He was killed, along with almost everyone else in the homes: more than 40 people. All the women and children were killed.

Nothing, legally, justifies attacks like these: you cannot suspend the basic tenets of International Humanitarian Law on the grounds that you're fighting *really bad* people, and will obey the Laws of War again once you've 'killed 'em all dead'. Nor, of course, *can* you: indeed, over two thousand US troops remain in Iraq, on a never-ending 'counter-terrorism' mission for which the White House recently requested another \$400 million, a tiny top-up of the roughly two trillion dollars wasted on the war so far. As 'Musab' told *Amnesty* six years ago, "this war [for Mosul] will guarantee there will be fighting again"; as 'Hussein' feared, "it is a circle of violence that never ends"; and as 'Hashem' himself concluded, "there is no point in rebuilding anything as it will all be destroyed again... The cheapest thing in Iraq is a human being."

Between 285-315,000 human beings have lost their lives as a result of “direct war deaths” since the US invasion, according to the latest conservative estimate (released last week) from the Costs of War Project: 4,600 US military personnel, 15 civilian Pentagon employees, 324 British and other Allied soldiers, 3,600 US contractors, 52,000 Iraqi military and police, 43,000 opposition fighters, 282 journalists, 64 humanitarian aid and NGO workers – O, and between 185-210,000 civilians. ‘Indirect’ or ‘excess’ deaths, defined in the Costs of War study as those which “would not have occurred in the absence of the war,” are impossible to calculate accurately, though likely to be at least three times higher than deaths, to quote the study again, “from bombs, bullets, and fire.”

And what ‘peace’ has all that ‘strength,’ that vast expenditure of money and might, purchased? So far, the Cataclysm has created over 8 million refugees and over one million IDPs (internally displaced people): in total, 9.2 million Iraqis, a third of the population. And in October 2019, huge youth-led protests erupted in Baghdad and other cities, a “spontaneous outburst,” to quote the International Crisis Group, “decrying corruption, poor public services and unemployment”: a “leaderless...grass-roots movement” that the authorities could neither “co-opt” nor shift from their demand, not for yet another change of government, but a fundamental change of system, a shift in power sufficient to break the stranglehold of sectarian parties often acting on behalf (and in the pay) of foreign interests, particularly – but not only – American and Iranian. Largely peaceful, the protests – known as the Tishreen Uprising (‘Tishreen’ is ‘October’ in Arabic) – were met with savage violence by both heavily-armed police and irregular militias. Though at least 600 protesters, or ‘Tishreenis,’ were killed in a few months – with 20,000 injured, and who knows how many tortured, abducted, and jailed – occupations of public squares continued until a new, national stranglehold, the COVID lockdown, largely (if only temporarily) silenced the two main protest chants: ‘We want a homeland!’ and ‘An Iraqi revolution – not American or Iranian.’

(Imagine, one moment, what a protracted, draconian lockdown was like in a city like Baghdad – not to mention ruined Mosul! – subject to ferocious heat, routinely without electricity and/or water for hours a day, and with a ‘health care’ system destroyed by decades of sanctions and war.)

“The post-2003 state,” to quote the International Crisis Group again, “was dysfunctional from its inception, conceived in Pentagon corridors and bred on ideological precepts (top-down state building, rapid privatization) fortified with bags of cash. The result was corrupt, inept governance and the near-total absence of security... Into the crevices stepped non-state actors – both insurgents seeking to overthrow the new order and militias striving to uphold it.” This “chronic instability” only “deepened in the aftermath of the war with ISIS,” with the central government, when it functioned at all, operating effectively “only as an administrator of ever-expanding patronage networks”.

And O, what a lovely war – what a quick, easy, glorious victory – it was supposed to be!

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Twenty years ago, a CBC reporter asked me what Peace Quest Cape Breton wanted to see happen in Iraq ‘now the war had started’. I answered, *that it stop*, that the Fire cease. I remember, as I said it, *hearing* how naïve and unrealistic it must have sounded to many listeners. But I didn’t want – as the bombs dropped and the racket of war (pun intended) made *itself* heard – to cede that basic ground of conscientious objection to the war – to *war* – as a crime.

In his Christmas Eve ‘Appeal for Peace in Ukraine and the World’, Bishop William Barber of the Poor People’s Campaign in the US argued “we need a ceasefire [in Ukraine] in order to make an honest assessment of where we are,” to “pause for a moment” and “count the cost.” “If,” he continued, “we could just stop...turning our eyes away, and look at the bodies and the blood and the brokenness, and assess the destruction, then maybe, for our sake and our children’s sake, a ceasefire could help us realize that the world needs an antiwar coalition, if we’re going to be the world that’s possible.” And he concluded: “just stop. Just stop. Stop. Cease firing. Let the night go silent. And hear the voice of God until the night becomes holy without the sound of war and we study war no more.”

The reference is to the lesser-known second part of the famous prophesy of Isaiah: “they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” Well, the best way to stop studying – idolising – war is to start studying – learning the best way to *wage* – peace, and last week Peace Quest Cape Breton issued a ‘Strength Through Peace’ pledge, “a set of premises about civilized state behavior in the 21st century which we believe the vast majority of the world’s peoples – and a significant majority of UN states – would endorse.”

In the modern world and atomic age, the Pledge declares, “war as an instrument of foreign policy – a continuation of politics by violent means – is impermissible and illegitimate under any circumstances,” for not only is “conventional war itself intolerably destructive,” it “runs the unacceptable risk of escalation to nuclear use”; or, as Bishop Barber quotes Martin Luther King as insisting: “The potential destructiveness of modern weapons totally rules out the possibility of war ever again achieving a negative good,” or serving as a ‘necessary evil’. “If,” King concluded, “we assume that mankind has a right to survive, then we must find an alternative to war”. The good news is, as the Pledge relates, that that ‘alternative’ is not just desirable but feasible, that armed conflict “can and must be prevented through international law and conventions verifiably eliminating all weapons of mass destruction, and limiting all national armed forces to a size and capability strictly commensurate with territorial self-defence,” while recognising that “the *absence* of war implies and requires the *presence* of credible alternative means and mechanisms for conflict prevention, resolution, and impartial dispute arbitration, backed by substantial and sustained investments in peacebuilding and peace education”.

The even better news is that “such demilitarization will crucially facilitate...the democratization and decolonization of a world system currently dominated by military-industrial powers and alliances,” finally yielding a massive ‘peace dividend’ as global expenditure on death and destruction falls from its sickeningly dizzy height of \$2+trillion per annum”.

All we are saying...is war gives us no chance. To either thrive, or survive.