

Press Release

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Remember The Debt We Owe Mesopotamia

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Good news doesn't sell papers. Nor, it appears, does the idea of respect for human dignity. Recent flurried debates over how events in Iraq will unfold have dwelt almost exclusively on technical issues – political and economic security. The salient omission in all discussions is the less media-friendly topic of how the exercise of power must engage with human values. While uncertainty grips virtually all parts of this fragile globe, thousands of Iraqi families whose ancestors represented the first flowering of human civilization have lived for decades in deteriorating conditions under an arbitrary death sentence.

There are options for the Security Council; there are options for the allies; and there are options for Saddam. Not to recognize and exercise these alternatives for the common good is to invite a polarity of extremes the world over.

The land of Iraq is rightly regarded as the cradle of civilization. It gave humanity some of its greatest achievements in science, law, literature and the arts. Archaeologists are keenly aware of the debt we owe Mesopotamia — the Book of Job, the 'virtuous sufferer', was first formulated in Sumerian cuneiform. I do not believe in seeking a conversation between my civilization and your civilization; we are "one world and ten thousand cultures".

Iraq has the human potential to be a catalyst for civil society and economic reconstruction based on equity and justice in the Arab and Muslim world. As we face the prospect of war, surely we must,

in the name of humanity, accept that the post-war world will be no better if it fails to win the peace. Civilization should be restored to Iraq, and civic dignity should be given back to her talented people.

This cannot be done by creating chaos and further traumatizing young people who will in the future take up the reins of power. The unrelenting pressure of living under threat is causing ordinary people's minds and will to atrophy. The project of rebuilding in Iraq after any strike will have to be a reconstruction, not just of infrastructure, but also of hearts and minds. After years of suffering followed by war in our Middle East region, there has to be a reconstruction of attitudes.

The issue that must be at the forefront of policy is what can be done now to ensure that Iraq does not fracture into a 'militarized democracy'. Surely the focus of politics for people is sovereignty for the citizens of Iraq in their richness and their diversity. Iraq's plurality – Christian, Kurd, Turkman, Sunni, Shi'a – has not been taken into full consideration. A 'Marshall plan' should include a Muslim and international benevolent fund to empower the poor to build a culture of peace through a culture of participation.

We have been told that waging war on Iraq will bring stability to the Middle East and contribute to a more peaceful world order. Whether Saddam steps down, or is bombed, or inspections continue indefinitely, we cannot overlook the fact that the world will continue to face the problem of what to do about massive feelings of exclusion, of the ghettoization of the Other, and of the privatized war that is terrorism. As long as politicians see their agenda in exclusively material terms, there can be no real dialogue about our shared values and no peace for anybody upon this planet. But if we are really talking about human security, what about a regional code of conduct for WMD worldwide?

Current technical debates in the Security Council focus on security in the material sense. The rights and responsibilities of its indigenous population in freedom and human dignity will only incite more violence and counter-violence. Yet, the weapon of mass destruction about which we should be most concerned is the absence

of a civilizational discourse of post-war reconstruction and development of our shared humanitarian values world wide.

As a Muslim, I believe in the *haq el hurriya* and *haq el karama*, the right to freedom and the right to human dignity. Politicians have turned from the public good to narrower considerations. Yet, in the words of my friend Rabbi Magonet citing the *hallel*: “To get out of this narrowness, I called on God. God answered me with a broader vision. Give thanks to the eternal who is good, for God’s love is *la-olam*: for the whole world.” Finally, in the words of His Holiness the Pope: “God does not interfere in the affairs of man; God is a judge and an arbiter”. I think the time has come in our interconnected world to teach not only truth, but virtue and common purpose in saving our shared humanity.

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