



## *Accounts Outstanding*

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Globalization, once touted as the panacea for the world's ills, has a nasty side. It seems to have become the ideal breeding ground for war and terrorism. It also plays the old ditty: 'The rich get richer and the poor get poorer.' The pressure's on all the time, and those in a position to relieve it just don't seem to give a rip. The Internet, the grand highway for information and communication, has turned into the perfect medium for chaos and the venue for crud and crudity. The world's so-called 'great religions' are in massive disarray, their leaders, like Sergeant Schultz of the old TV series, Hogan's Heroes, shake their massive jowls, each proclaiming, 'I know nothing! ... nothing!' Political leadership the world over has become a mockery, and the proliferation of NGOs for every cause under heaven only adds to the cacophony.

In the meantime ... in between time ... nobody has fun. People die by the job lot, and those that don't, live in misery and fear.

This was recently brought home to me when I attended a meeting between Iraqi and American Christians.

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It is foolish for us to say that religious difference counts for nothing. It counts. It counts for much in each individual's life not least in the God-besotted Middle East. But, until recently, it did not make for enmity between neighbors.

In happier times, when Muslim, Christian and Jewish Arabs (yes, there are Jewish Arabs no matter Israeli propaganda; after all they're the only ones who know how to cook really good food!) would visit each other on their feast days, there would be lively and good-natured debates on religious issues. But then people would get on with the business of living and religious distinctions would fade into the background. You did not ask whether so-and-so was a Jew or a Christian or a Shî'ite or a Sunnî Muslim. You knew, but it didn't make much difference in the way you lived. Neighborhoods developed according to other principles. People were people and you judged them on what they did. This is not tolerance. Tolerance implies something that people don't like and must forgive. Tolerance is patronizing and even demeaning. The Middle East's ancient style is to practice acceptance and that has nothing to do with tolerance. You accept each other on face value applying the principle that 'by their fruits you shall know them'.

In point of fact, an old friend recently reminded me, Muslims will still often

choose Christians to administer their finances and property. Simply, it is assumed that they will fulfill their trust. Even in the early-20th century, as new governments were being established in the Middle East after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, not infrequently the Minister of Finance would be a Jew. It was a kind of symbiosis in the region — Muslim, Christian and Jew. I have also known it to be true that if a Muslim had a personal problem of a delicate nature he or she would sooner go to a Christian or a Jewish ‘confessor’ than to the local Muslim mullah for advice, interpretation or reassurance. It just made better sense.

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So what’s gone wrong? Obviously and definitely something has gone wrong and that fairly recently. We hear a great deal about inter-communal tension and conflict. In the late ’40s suddenly it was Arab against Jew (an oxymoron, actually, that has now become a trite but commonly accepted cliché). Now, especially in Iraq but also in Pakistan and elsewhere, we hear about intra-Muslim tensions between Sunnîs and Shî’ah. Bombs go off and people’s emotions are inflamed. And even before the Bush doctrine was promulgated we were hearing about broadband Muslim animosity against Christians. All this has really puzzled me. It has not really applied for over twelve centuries and now, all of a sudden, it does? It has become a big issue?

I quite understand the tension between Fatah and Hamas in Palestine. It is between a secular framing of Palestinian identity (that Israel has labored nearly forty years to deconstruct) and a fuzzily doctrinaire religious political program (that Israel began promoting twenty years ago). The issues there are clear and, in a sense, clean. Furthermore, the Israelis needed a non-national opponent with a religious agenda, and it has fortuitously found it in its brainchild, Hamas. The devil you create is convenient. A more perfect mating of bedfellows could not have been forecast even a year ago. Now it’s a reality. The Palestinian people be damned! From an Israeli perspective, the sooner the quicker.

But in Iraq the current alignment is absolutely incredible. From the day Desert Storm was launched we began hearing about a Shî’ite South, a Sunnî middle, and a Kurdish North (the Iraqi Kurds are, by the way, Sunnîs, so we’re mixing apples with oranges here). Left out of the ethno-religious mix, at least in the western media, are the Chaldean, the Armenian and the Assyrian Christians, the Yazîdîs, the Sabeans and several other minorities. The western press seems to know nothing about them, yet they’re there. The Christians seem to crop up when names like that of Tariq ‘Azîz are mentioned but only en passant. They don’t really count.

My friend pointed out that Saddâm Husayn’s and the Sa’ûdî royal family’s personal pilots were and are all Christians. Saddâm’s chefs and those of many of the Middle East’s heads of state and wealthy families are also Arab Christians. Christians occupy positions of trust even in so-called Islamic banks, and Christian architects build many of the mosques (but that’s been going on since the 8th century). They are critical members of planning groups in economic enterprises throughout the Arab world. Without

them there would be a serious void of expertise.

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So what's happening in Iraq in particular?

First, there seems to be an intentional effort to build sectarian divides where none really existed before. This recent manufacture coincides with the Anglo-American occupation of the country. Second, those divides, apart from massive misery for the middle class, have led to a serious brain drain. Christians in the south of the country, who make up a disproportionate percentage of that middle class and its educated talent, are either being encouraged to emigrate (for instance the whole Armenian Protestant community in Iraq has evaporated, California being a major beneficiary), or they are being lured to the Kurdish North with offers of good jobs, new homes and generous compensation. The Kurds, after all, are building a new nation-state, and need all the expertise they can get. Those who remain in their ancestral homes are being marginalized, economically crippled and isolated. Sunnîs in the South are beginning to head for central Iraq, and that too seems to be an intentional policy. And what happens once this demographic redistribution is achieved? Then, say our Iraqi friends, there will be all the makings for real civil war.

Iraqis will tell you — be they Muslim or Christian — that they never really focused upon the fact that their neighbors were of a different religion. It was not a factor in neighborliness. You didn't think about the fact that Ahmad was a Sunnî or that 'Alî was a Shî'î, that Sarkis was an Armenian Christian or that Mûsâ was a Jew. They were all neighbors and friends. But now that has changed. And it is consistent with the Bush doctrine that it should do so.

Over and above all that, among the phenomena of occupation has been the influx into Iraq of para-church groups that are preying upon the Christian community and demoralizing it. Around one of the major Chaldean Catholic churches in Baghdad (once well over 3,000 members and now down to less than 2,000) there are twelve little 'house churches' that drain off the congregation's youth with offers of gifts and other incentives. It is the tried and true 'rice Christian' approach. "What are we supposed to do?" one Christian asks. "If we don't accept their gifts our youth will leave. People are hungry, and the gifts are very tempting."

The Bush occupation of Iraq has encouraged very well heeled American para-church groups (among them Franklin Graham's 'Samaritan's Purse') to set up shop in Baghdad and other major Iraqi cities. While bombs have gone off in front of old and established churches, none ... none at all! ... have targeted these groups, and it's not that they are not known. Think about that! "Let them talk to Muslims. We don't mind. But they don't," said another Iraqi Christian. "Why do they target us? We are Christians trying to make our way in an atmosphere of chaos. What's their agenda? What do they hope to gain?"

Indeed, what is their agenda? With the flood of American money into Iraq, these Christian para-church groups are among the most despicable of exploiters. We are no longer in the 19th century. This is the 21st century. Buying adherents or ‘converts’ with filthy lucre is despicable. Another churchman told me, “There’s an external brain-drain from which all Iraqi churches suffer — and not just the churches but the whole of Iraqi society suffers from this. We understand that because it affects not just us but everyone. But now, with these para-church groups, there is an internal drain targeting the churches, an overall demoralization of the Iraqi Christian community that we are hard-put to stem or even understand.”

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As the misery quotient continues to enlarge in Iraq the power brokers on all sides only seem intent on encouraging its growth. It is quite incredible that in a country occupied by the world’s most sophisticated and potent industrial power, electrical power is still available to homes for two hours out of every 24. In Baghdad that once boasted the region’s most efficient water and sewerage systems, water is now hard come by and sewage runs in the streets. Mosquitoes, once rare in the city because of efficient public health measures, now thrive in the open drains. Among the poor the rate of water-borne diseases climbs daily. In a country that sits upon untold oil reserves there are massive fuel shortages. People line up in the blistering hot sun in queues stretching two miles to get even two liters (one gallon) of petrol. They have to push their cars the last stretch because their tanks have gone dry. All this breeds anger. They look at the highly-touted process toward democracy and, if they don’t weep, they cannot but laugh. All this is utterly ludicrous.

Those are just the simple needs of every day life. Add to them the proliferation of armed militias, enterprising criminal gangs, and the so-called ‘Sunnî insurgency’. One man compared walking out of one’s front door to stepping into a minefield. You never know what’s going to happen in an environment that has lost all civic coherence. One family has had four of its members abducted and held to ransom, some more than once. And then there is the American occupation. Scared and ill-trained kids wield big guns. They know nothing of the culture and none of the language. Their officers are scarcely older or better oriented than they are. What happened in Hadithah is only a case, one of many. A man’s brother was returning to Baghdad after a day in the country with his family. As instructed, he got out of his car far distant from the roadblock and walked toward the soldiers. It was then he made an innocent and fatal mistake. His mobile phone started to ring, and he pulled it out of his pocket. The next thing the family saw was him falling onto his back. He had been shot dead through the left eye. This is not unusual. It happens every day.

And the anger grows along with the frustration.

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So, the question arises: What do the Iraqis want the Americans to do now?

“Well,” one answers, “we didn’t ask you to come, but now you’re here. You’ve made a royal mess of the job. Your Minister of War is a classic jackass who designed a military occupation that has done everything wrong. The upshot is that the American soldier is one of the many agents of terror in Iraqi eyes.”

“OK,” the American asks, “should we pull out?”

“Heavens no!” replies the Iraqi in alarm. “You can’t just pull out! You’ve become the major factor in our lives, whether we like it or not ... whether you like it or not.”

“OK, then what?”

“The simple answer,” comes the Iraqi’s answer, “is that you’ve got to do something different than what you’ve been doing. Look, guys, you have an Army Corps of Engineers second to none in the world. We know. We’ve read the books. They’ve been known to build for peace as efficiently as they build for war. What you need to do now is phase over from a destructive and paranoid encounter with so-called ‘terrorists’ toward rebuilding Iraq’s infrastructure. It won’t be easy, but it’s just that simple. Change the face of your military. Bring in people who speak Arabic, who understand our world, and who know how to build rather than destroy. You’ve got millions of them in the United States. Take the shavelings back home or repost them to your bases in our vast desert. Just get them off the street! And then get to work.

“Restore the electrical supply in the cities, get the sewage plants up and working, get water purification plants back in service, get the refineries back on line and the gas stations pumping gas, and help our health system recover both its dignity and efficiency. You destroyed all of these; now rebuild them. Work at decreasing the rage and frustration that most people cannot help but feel because of daily humiliations and frustration. And lighten up, for God’s sake!

“Give us back the American we once knew. We’re sick of the Halliburton or Bechtel corporate raiders, the economic hit-men who just want to screw the living daylight out of us. We’re tired of the Bush-type cowboy and the Cheney-type Mafioso you so willingly export to us. We’re sick of the religious Graham-type plunderer who’s long suit is our misery. What we would like to see once again is that ‘Ugly American’ who actually likes people and sincerely wants to help them. You’ve got those too in great plenty. We know. We’ve welcomed them before, and long to welcome them again. But, for God’s sake, finish the job you started, and finish it right!”

“It’s not too late?” asks an abashed American.

“It can’t be too late,” the Iraqi smiles. “We’re still here, and so are you. It can happen, but please make it happen soon. Let’s settle accounts outstanding.”

And I greet you from the lands of the morning.