

House of Lords debate on Iraq

Thursday, 22 February 2007

Baroness Turner of Camden: The present Iraqi Government do not seem able to provide stability, which is what most Iraqis want. The United States Government seem to be attributing much of the unrest to the influence of Iran. For that reason, I am surprised that our Government continue to proscribe the PMOI—the People’s Mujaheddin Organisation of Iran—a peaceable organisation supported by many women.

House of Lords

Debate on Iraq

Baroness Turner of Camden: My Lords, I am glad that we now have an opportunity to debate Iraq; it has been quite a long time since we have done so. I thank the noble Lord, Lord Hurd, for introducing the debate.

I opposed the war from the beginning. I said so in the debates that we had prior to the invasion. I did not believe in the so-called dossiers—it did not seem likely that a regime that had suffered a catastrophic defeat in 1991, followed by punitive sanctions and bombing attacks, would be able to offer much of a threat to the rest of the world. Indeed, that proved to be the case. The Iraqi regime at the time protested that it had no WMD and submitted a lengthy statement to the UN, but our Government said that no one could possibly believe it. A great deal of effort went into persuading the public and MPs in the other place to support the case for war. Nevertheless, many were not persuaded and the war has never been popular. It is even less so now, and public opinion appears to be turning against it, even in the United States.

Many who supported the war claim to have been misled by the so-called intelligence. Others say that while it was right to go to war, it was wrong not to have planned for what would happen afterwards. Those who were responsible for starting the war appeared to have very little knowledge of what was likely to follow a coalition victory. I have often been told by my noble friends who supported the war that otherwise Saddam Hussein would still be in power, and that is a justification. Many Iraqis, faced with the present awful situation, might feel that even that would be preferable.

In any event, my noble friends’ argument underestimates the feeling of revulsion that many of us have about the war and about what it has meant to thousands of ordinary citizens of Iraq. We are concerned at the apparent failure of those responsible for starting it to appreciate what modern warfare does to the people unwittingly caught up in it. Some of us, like me, are old enough to remember what bombing is like for civilians on the ground. It was absolutely terrifying, and I can still recall it.

There has been an unwillingness throughout to count Iraqi deaths and casualties. Various estimates have been made; there was a much publicised one of around 650,000. I was incensed at what happened in Fallujah. A town roughly the size of Cardiff was rendered into rubble as a result of a couple of attacks. No information was available at the time on the number of civilian casualties or about what happened to the civilians who lost their home. I believe that to have been a war crime.

The current insurgency is obviously adding to casualties among Iraqis, although there are mounting casualties among coalition troops, including our own. Perhaps it was really believed that the Iraqi population would welcome the coalition forces as liberators, but clearly that has not happened. Hearts and minds have not been won. Instead, there has been a strengthening of fundamentalism. Saddam Hussein was a tyrant, but a secular one. Women had rights, unusual in other Arab states. The 70,000-strong Christian community was left undisturbed.

There have now been elections. We saw on television queues of people lining up to vote, which was reported as a great advance. But there were two separate queues—one for women and the other for men. The women were all dressed in black from head to foot and many were completely veiled. They were there because their clerics told them to be; surely we realised what that meant.

In a very short time, women were having to struggle to retain the personal status law that they had had under Saddam, which gave women rights in relation to divorce and inheritance, denied to them under Sharia law. Women who received professional training and employment under the previous regime are leaving in large numbers for Jordan, where they will be comparatively free.

Members of the Christian community are also leaving because they face threats from religious fundamentalists. Homosexuals are facing threats, too. Gangs of religious fundamentalists are tracking them down and killing them, and getting away with it. Those groups have certainly not benefited from the demise of the previous regime. From many points of view, the Iraq war has been a disaster.

So what should be done now? We have the ‘surge’ of the President of the United States, although this may not be sufficient to bring about an ending to the so-called insurgency. Of course, there is opposition to it in the House of Representatives, while the declining public support for the war in our country has meant that the Government

have had to consider withdrawing our troops. Involving the United Nations might seem appropriate, although it does not seem likely that other countries would be willing to send their troops on peacekeeping duties at the present time.

The present Iraqi Government do not seem able to provide stability, which is what most Iraqis want. The United States Government seem to be attributing much of the unrest to the influence of Iran. While there are clearly religious connections with the Shia clerics in the south, there certainly does not appear to be a case for military action against the Iranian regime. It is a repressive regime, but there are signs of internal opposition, particularly among young people, to the heavy-handed rule of the mullahs. We should do whatever we can to assist the democratically inclined internal opposition. For that reason, I am surprised that our Government continue to proscribe the PMOI—the People’s Mujaheddin Organisation of Iran—a peaceable organisation supported by many women. A threat of military action against Iran, however, is more likely to strengthen the present fanatical regime than weaken it.

As far as Iraq is concerned, we should bring our troops home. We should not expose these young men and women to the dangers that they are facing for what seems to be an increasingly dubious outcome. In fact, if we were able to admit that the whole adventure had been a mistake and offer to compensate the Iraqis for what our intervention has done to their people and their country, it might well go some way to restoring our collapsed reputation throughout the Middle East. That, of course, is unlikely to happen, although it should. In the mean time, I support the idea of an inquiry. It might help us to avoid similar mistakes in the future.

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200607/ldhansrd/text/70222-0009.htm>