

## **Keynote Address by Zaineb Alani Delivered to the National Antiwar Conference Held July 10-12, 2009 at La Roche College in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania**

On July 4 of this year, Vice President Biden celebrated American Independence day in occupied Iraq, in one of the presidential palaces of the former regime, now an integral part of the US-run 'Green Zone'. Four days earlier, PM Nouri Al-Maliki's US-installed puppet government declared a 'victory' signaled by the pullout of US troops from major Iraqi cities, and the beginning of the 'restoration of sovereignty'. Nothing could have been more hypocritical or comical.

When the late Robert McNamara paid a visit to the Independent country of Vietnam that he had previously 'sought to conquer' and failed, he said to their foreign minister, "We wanted to give you Democracy." The reply was, "We wanted our Independence first." Why do American policy-makers never learn from history?

I'm amazed by the number of Americans who are 'hurt' that the Iraqis are celebrating US troop withdrawal with no 'word of thanks'. The sad truth is that there is no withdrawal and there is NOTHING to thank for. For the Iraqis the list of war reparations is not one that the US can dream to even begin to fulfill. How can you bring 1.2 million people back to life? How can you render 2 million war widows married wives again? And how can you give back a lost parent to 5 million Iraqi orphans?

The celebrations of 'independence' in Iraq today are a circus where the primary clowns are the same thugs that count on US presence to survive. And how can anyone question the status of continued US military presence when the largest embassy in the world, the size of 80 football fields, lies in one of the most beautiful locations in the heart of Baghdad. The current troop level dispels the myth of the 'SOFA' agreement. Even after the June 30th deadline, 134,000 US soldiers will be left behind. This number is reminiscent of troop levels in 2003, when the invasion began and before the so-called 'Surge'. Further, and to take it straight from the horse's mouth, the first US military commander in Iraq openly announces 'a longer stay in Iraq for US troops'. In fact, General Odierno, insists "It's not going to end, OK? There'll always be some sort of low-level insurgency in Iraq for the next 5, 10, 15 years..." If so, then what are we celebrating? And what form of 'crystal ball' has General Odierno asserting that there will ALWAYS be a need for US troop presence? Unless, it's the world's second largest oil field.

To the average Iraqi citizen, and rightly so, the Americans are there for the oil, and the puppet-government with its 'no-bid' to 'selective-bid' oil contract policy is there to serve this very purpose. In fact, the common sentiment in Baghdad today is that we went from living under the rule of a tyrannical Ali Baba to that of 40 hundred ruling thieves. According to Transparency International, Iraq is among one of the top countries showing the highest levels of perceived corruption. Jabbar Al-Luaibi, former head of the South Oil company in Basrah, describes the process of the Iraqi's Oil Ministry of maintaining oil production records like 'driving a car without any indicators on the dashboard.'

In Iraq today, there is a detention nightmare, very much reminiscent of Abu-Ghraib under US authority, and very similar to the type of torture chambers that this very occupation claimed to wage war against! 300 Iraqi detainees went into a hunger strike at the Risafa prison in mid-June. The world did not hear them.

Never in the history of Iraq have there been elections established on sectarian and ethnic platforms, thus further reinforcing the birth and growth of 'militias', and paving the way to US-backed mercenary groups. The concept is 'foreign' in Iraq's modern history. Even when the people of Iraq voted, a large majority

believed that by voting they were expediting the process of US troop withdrawal. Sadly not.

The recent escalation of bombings in Iraq is NOT due to the temporary US withdrawal from the major cities, but rather a statement against a continued foreign occupation. Bombings will continue as long as there is foreign presence on Iraqi soil. The foremost expert on the logic of suicide terrorism, Robert Pape, states that it is NOT primarily motivated by fundamentalism but by the occupation. This motivation is further aggravated when there is a fundamental difference in faith and culture between the occupier and occupied people.

Today, Iraq is a nation of 2 million war widows, 5 million orphans, 2 million internally displaced, and 4 million refugees surviving under the meanest living conditions in neighboring countries, topping the UNHCR World Refugee Statistics for the region. Today 80% of Iraqis civilians have witnessed shootings, kidnapping and killings (per UN statistics). Refugees who have relocated to the US find it extremely difficult to adapt to 'normalcy'. I teach refugees English as a Second Language in Columbus, Ohio. The trauma these people have witnessed is unimaginable. There is not ONE family who has not suffered their child being kidnapped, or lost a loved one to sectarian 'revenge' killings. I have personally witnessed the struggle of a ten year old to adapt to a school system and the concept of normal life where people are not necessarily out there to 'kill him!' Jewad, whose soccer ball rolled onto a corpse in a Baghdad dumpster when he was 9, can never look at a soccer ball the same way again. Needless to say, he now has no interest in any ball game.

In neighboring countries where there is a huge Iraqi refugee population, there also exists a thriving sex trade where the majority of the victims are female minors as young as 13 years old. The text book term for this tragic phenomenon is 'survival sex'. My cousin who is a refugee in Syria has been insulted time and time again, when the women in his family were referred to as 'refugee sluts' despite the fact neither he nor his family had set foot in the red light areas that the Syrian authorities have now turned into an 'unofficial' lucrative tourist attraction.

Unemployment rates in Iraq today fluctuate between 27-60% depending on the region and whether or not a curfew is in effect. 40% of Iraq's professionals and technocrats have left the country. 2000 + physicians have been murdered since 2005 and the health infrastructure is in tatters. Disease is rampant where approximately 10,000 are inflicted with cholera. AIDS which was a not even significant statistic prior to the invasion is now at 75,000 cases (WHO). Ten years ago, there were only 12 known cases.

Today Baghdad is a city of walls. Neighborhoods are segregated like never before and...Baghdad is finally 'ethnically segregated'. The 2 million internally displaced have learned to adapt to their new 'environment', but traveling from one neighborhood to another can still cost one his/her life if they do not carry an ID card. My mother's childhood friend who needed a kidney dialysis died on the way to hospital because the ambulance was stopped multiple times between neighborhood checkpoints with some delays amounting to over an hour. Even if he had made it to hospital, the possibility of his getting the appropriate treatment in a sanitary environment would have been negligible. Three months before the invasion my mother underwent an angioplasty and despite the imposition of sanctions then and the lack of non-expired materials, her surgery was successful. Early, this year, my brother's father-in-law had to be flown into neighboring Amman for the same treatment because the best Iraqi hospitals could not provide it. He could afford the flight; other Iraqis in his condition would just perish. My own uncle, only 6 months ago, was wheeled out of an operation room three times because the dying hospital generators could not take care of the recurrent power outages. Power outages are still very frequent with the population receiving only 50% of the power supply they used to have prior to the invasion. Water, which was not potable prior to the invasion, is still dangerously contaminated in a lot of areas where people are dependant on well-water because the pipes that connect them to the general water network that was bombed during 'shock and awe' have still not been repaired.

When I was growing up in Iraq, and up until the last day before the invasion, had I been able to visit, I would have been able to walk the streets dressed as I am now or drive my car in the streets of Baghdad. I went to school and completed my graduate degree there; I was one of 12 women who graduated from my department in 1991. Then, if I had wanted to pay a water bill, for instance, I would stand in a long line, but I would not have to bribe the clerk at the register to have my transaction completed. For every SINGLE government transaction today, you need to know somebody and that somebody is dependent on your money to survive. Otherwise, you can consider it lost in red tape for up to six months! When my mother ventured to renew her passport; she was given two choices; wait for 8 months, or pay \$600.00 (US) to have it delivered in 2 weeks. When I used to drive in Baghdad, I was rarely required to carry an ID. Today, if I don't, and I fall in the hands of the wrong militia, I'm potentially looking at a death sentence.

What caused this nightmare 6 years ago, and continues to cause it has not and is not going away soon. The occupation seems to be there to stay, and the silence of the American people in the midst of an unprecedented economic crisis has left them confused and misguided as to what has brought about all this, namely, America's foreign wars and imperialism.

The Iraqi, Afghan, and Pakistani people cannot win against the American war machine. On their own, they are helpless. They have only one hope, YOU. We need to build a movement so strong that our voices are heard as ONE, so loud that we force the occupiers to leave the Middle East and elsewhere where they impose their colonial occupations and plunder the natural resources and wealth of weaker nations. American, Iraqi, Afghan and Palestinian peoples are paying a dear price in blood and treasure for the continuation of these wars and occupations.

My hope is that this movement unites, that our minor differences are diminished by our bigger cause, and that this conference will pave the way for agreement on united actions in the months ahead that will tell the whole world when we hit the streets this fall, that we are raising high the banners of "Out Now!" "Out Now from Iraq!" "Out Now from Afghanistan!" "Out Now for Israeli Troops from Palestine!" The world needs to know that the U.S. antiwar movement is not only alive and kicking, but is determined to end the nightmares in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Palestine.

*To join the National Assembly to End the Iraq And Afghanistan Wars And Occupations, an organization must subscribe to the five points in the National Assembly's structure memo -- immediate withdrawal, mass demonstrations, unity, democratic decision making, independence from political parties - submit an application form, and select a representative to the Continuations Body, the highest decision-making and action implementation body of the National Assembly between conferences. Go to the website [www.natassembly.org](http://www.natassembly.org) for information and an application or email [natassembly@aol.com](mailto:natassembly@aol.com).*