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Incoherence of Power



An interview with Ali Allawi

Ali Allawi, former Minister of Finance and Defense on the Interim Iraqi Governing Council, dons a sky blue tie and navy suit. We meet at the the Library Hotel in midtown Manhattan, so named for its location near the New York Public Library. To explore that theme perhaps to a schmaltzy degree, the tall, narrow hotel exhibits stacks of books in its lobbies and hallways; I find Allawi skimming through a hardcover edition of Francis Fukuyama's End of History and the Last Man, which he found by chance in the hotel's stacks. When he recognizes me, he puts the book down, stands, walks around the table to meet me for a handshake and settles back into his seat against the wall. As he speaks, he wears the expression of man who used to smile, an expression I've seen before on exiles from other countries.

In his new book, The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace (Yale University Press), Allawi argues that the U.S.

invasion and occupation of Iraq were miscalculated from the beginning, starting from a "monumental ignorance" on the part of American planners and proceeding along with incoherence in choice after choice. Ignorance, for example, of Iraq's history yielded catastrophic results. That history, Allawi writes, has been defined for decades by "fissures" deeply embedded within society. And the incoherence coming from different factions of neocons and realists vying for a voice and making decisions ideologically rather than pragmatically—this too has given the insurgency more than a foothold. The U.S. also ignored the decay of the 1990s, when sanctions, social erosion brought on by the Iran-Iraq war, the Kuwait war, and hyper-inflation all conspired basically to do away with the Iraqi middle class and what Allawi calls the "idea" of Iraq. Without that middle class, without that nationally unifying idea, he writes, there would be no glue to prevent the sectarian dissolution that has come, catastrophically, to characterize the United States' folly in Iraq.

Allawi was born in 1947; in 1956 he left Iraq for Britain, where he attended high school. He then studied in the U.S., earning degrees from MIT (in engineering) and Harvard (in economics). He has headed a London-based investment company, Pan-Arab, and served as a consultant to the World Bank. His uncle is Ahmed Chalabi, the noted former exile who led the opposition group, the Iraqi National Congress; and his cousin, Iyad Allawi, served as Iraq's interim prime minister from 2004 to 2005.

After we spoke for 45 minutes, with canned elevator music playing from a speaker above us and Library Hotel staff grinding coffee beans and frothing lattes in the background, Allawi was off to an interview on the Charlie Rose show, where he would again underline the point in his book that corruption under the U.S. occupation of Iraq is worse than it was under deposed dictator Saddam Hussein, because it is the "worst of both worlds. It is a degraded system with the potential of corruption [but] without the sanction that comes from a powerful intelligence and security operation." He believes that American forces should leave, but not before creating an "architecture of stability," which would start with some coherent framework for U.S. planning and policies. (He initially wanted to call the book, he told me, The Incoherence of Power.)

As for the surge, he notes, "[It] deals mainly with one aspect of the problem and that is to secure the city of Baghdad... In itself it's insufficient to lead to a situation where we would have a stable end state." In short, the U.S. should leave but not just yet, says Allawi—not because leaving now would

cause an explosion of violence in the near-term (that's inevitable, and under way) but because it would crystalize the sect-based dissolution of Iraq which could spread, he says, through the region.

—Joel Whitney

Guernica: What has the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq looked like to Iraqis?

Ali Allawi: Well, the situation has clearly evolved since April, 2003. Right now there's no doubt in my mind that there is an overwhelming consensus amongst the populace—the Arabs, not the Kurds—that the occupation should end. I think it's become clear that this is now an overwhelming demand of the Arab population of Iraq. That said, the political class—for lack of a better word—does not want to see the departure of Coalition troops. Certain groups see it as a presence that would strengthen their own hold on the government. Others see it as a countervailing force to thwart others—the Shi'a, for example—in their control of government.

The middle class had basically disappeared in the 1990s because of hyper-inflation, exile, people were paid a pittance and it was barely enough to get by. So the state became the provider of nearly every element of one's living.

Guernica: The phrase that the media has quoted you on—“monumental ignorance”—and the early chapters of your book, suggest there were signs of “fissures” in Iraqi society that should have been seen even before the invasion.

Ali Allawi: There's a whole slew of things that they should have known. I mean, I was involved in nearly all the opposition conferences, seminars and meetings with the U.S. and British governments in the days leading up to the war. Despite claims to the contrary, there was very little done to try to come to terms with the country that they were trying to invade and then occupy. There really was very little awareness or knowledge as to what had happened to Iraq between a sort of high point of the 1970s and all the tumultuous events of the 1990s, including the effects of the Iran-Iraq war, the Kuwait war, the insurrection, the crushing of the Kurdish uprisings, the al-Anfal campaign and the effects of sanctions. Their effect on the composition of society, stability, cohesiveness, and how it changed the profile of Iraq, was not considered at all.

The exile groups themselves should have known better. Certain groups did. The Kurds certainly had a presence there. The so-called liberal exile groups, the moderates and secularists, came from an altogether different trajectory; very few of them had any meaningful relationship with the country. The Islamists had their own agenda; they may have known or not known the state of decay, as it were, of Iraqi society. But they were seeking specifically street power, to transfer that power to street power for some kind of permanent stake in post-invasion government.

But by and large the ignorance did not come from the facts not being available. Iraq was not the sealed country that people thought it was. The U.S. certainly had a huge presence in the days of the inspection program—and the UN through its various agencies was also involved in humanitarian assistance, and knew the extent of the social crisis. But none of this translated into a coherent approach in the formulation of policy. Other things prevailed including ideologically derived agendas, including basically a willful ignoring of the facts. And, as I mentioned, the political exile groups were much more concerned about the political power of their post-invasion status...

Guernica: So you concede the administration wasn't getting neutral or objective information...

Ali Allawi: It wasn't looking for it. It was already propelled in a certain direction by—for lack of a better word—the neocons and the kind of ideological prescriptions that were formulated for Iraq. So a lot of things, for example, drove that agenda: the supposed existence of a large middle class, the secular bent

of Iraqis, the moderating influence of the Shi'a Arab influence in Iraq. In the end, it turned out to be patent nonsense. The middle class had basically disappeared in the 1990s because of hyper-inflation, exile, people were paid a pittance and it was barely enough to get by. So the state became the provider of nearly every element of one's living.

Guernica: Did you see much opposition within the United States early on to this willful ignoring of the facts, as you say?

Ali Allawi : No, I think the administration was on a roll at that point. The military victory gave them a huge push...

Guernica: But before the invasion itself—you mention Senator Joe Biden, who's running for president, or was, as perhaps a lonely voice of indignation before the war, who questioned Grossman and Feith in Senate hearings, and grilled them over a lack of planning for the post-invasion.

Ali Allawi: There were a few people who for partisan reasons or who genuinely believed that it was the right thing to do.... tried to stop this project. But I don't think they were well organized or had enough depth. Now, of course, Bush is paying the price.

The Sh'ia felt encouraged to rise up after Kuwait. There's evidence that the U.S. had sought an uprising against the regime. Well, when it happened, and then the mass graves are associated with the failure, that really poisoned the Sh'ia mind.

Guernica: You were involved in the planning conferences and seminars before March 2003 made up of Iraqi exiles and administration representatives. Were you in favor of the invasion initially?

Ali Allawi: No, I did not want an American invasion. I was extremely ambivalent about it. And I was on record. What I was hoping was that bringing in the U.S. on the side of the opponents of Saddam would give us the wherewithal to strengthen our ability to confront him. And perhaps even launch some kind of movement inside Iraq. But when it became clear there was a bandwagon moving toward invasion, my own position was very ambivalent; in the end, of course, I went along because I felt, and still believe, it would have been impossible to overthrow this regime in really any other way—unless we were given very much material support. So, yes, once it was clear this was happening, I went along but with great ambivalence.

Guernica: Given the divides under the surface of Iraqi society (what you call 'fissures') was catastrophe inevitable, given the lack of planning you describe and the effect of the 90s on Iraqi society, and the administration's unwillingness to look for objective information?

Ali Allawi: I think so. But catastrophes don't happen in a flash; they build up until they become inevitable. It became clear, to me at least, that the occupation was a doomed project sometime around the summer or early fall of 2003, a few weeks after my return to Baghdad. I kept a diary then. And going back I could refer to that period and could refer really to a set of events and the responses to them. I remember particularly the response of the Sh'ia. Because the Sh'ia felt they were encouraged to rise up after the Kuwait escapade. And there's enough evidence to suggest that the U.S. had publicly sought, maybe not that type of insurrection, but it sought a kind of uprising against the regime. Maybe they wanted more control. Well, when it happened and then the mass graves are associated with the failure, that really poisoned the Sh'ia mind and gave rise to the--

Guernica: Meaning the U.S. backed away from their tacit encouragement of Shiites to rise up against Saddam Hussein under Bush Senior and, when they did, offered no support—

Ali Allawi: None. In fact, you could say the contrary—that it encouraged the Iraqi government to crush [the uprising] by allowing the flight of helicopters. Maybe incidents of this kind can be explained away

because of the exigencies of the moment and extreme pressures to call it quits in Kuwait and pull out troops and so on. But all of that built-in a kind of deep suspicion about U.S. intentions amongst the Sh'ia. Even now I think there are doubts and suspicions as to the ultimate intentions of U.S. policy.

Guernica: One criticism you make the U.S. media have noted amply, the overzealous de-Ba'athification of the political structures including the complete disbanding of the Iraqi army. But I also noticed you pointed out that Garner drew suspicion for rubbing elbows with Ba'athists. So, did the administration go *too far* or not far enough in its de-Ba'athification campaign?

Ali Allawi: What comes across at every stage is really the incoherence of American policies. That was actually the original title of the book, *The Incoherence of Power*. Because whatever plan was given, or whatever justification was given for the war, was very quickly jettisoned after there were no weapons of mass destruction found. Policies were made and reversed. There was this kind of hesitancy about whether this was an occupying authority or a liberating army or an administrative arrangement or some kind of transitional approach. Everything was left in a state of uncertainty, which in my mind played a very large part in crystalizing the insurgency, because they could then see that the United States was stumbling to find some coherent policy as to what to do next. The overwhelming military power of the United States may have led many to believe that the whole thing would be just a few weeks of stabilizing ...

Guernica: And then handing it over...

Ali Allawi: Handing it over, or at least creating a political class that's loyal to you, dependent on you, and you can work through them. But when the lid of dictatorship was lifted these fissures that I talk about that have been there for decades, if not centuries, burst into the open. And they burst with a violence that caught everybody off-balance, including the Americans, or the Coalition Provisional Authority. Which is why it's foolish in my mind to compare Iraq—even though America brought huge amounts of power there—to other countries. Iraq is not Grenada.

Guernica: When you talk about these fissures and the American incoherence it reminds me of what Francis Fukuyama began saying when his book, *America at the Crossroads*, came out a year ago. Did you find this book here when you sat?

I think American withdrawal may even diminish the violence.

Ali Allawi: Yeah, it was just here when I sat down and I wanted to see how it holds up. It doesn't hold up.

Guernica: Well, in his latest book, he defined the Iraq war as the failure of the neocons to address certain contradictions inherent in neoconservatism—such as a suspicion of big government and social engineering, and then, loving moral power so much, choosing to export social engineering to a country it could hardly understand. Was that contradiction something you saw in trying to work with the Americans on the Iraqi side?

Ali Allawi: Well, the Iraqi leadership, if you want to call it that, that cooperated or provided the political cover in the first few months was just focused on their relative power. Very few people knew or cared where this thing was going. They knew that the United States had overwhelming power and therefore could dictate whether this fellow or that fellow should go up or down. And the main thing they were concerned about, still, is their relative power. Now the weakest chain in all of this were the liberals, democrats, seculars—whatever you want to call them—those who did not have a large indigenous power base. These people relied entirely on the machinations and politicking of the Americans, wherever it led.

The other group, the Islamists, knew what they wanted quickly, which is to establish their control wherever they were allowed to by the Americans. And they did that very successfully, in the entire south. The Kurds, of course, had no problems about control because they controlled their own territories. This sort of fragmentation of vision, or the absence of a vision, or the absence of any governing program, was

the reality of the matter. While nobody actually challenged the United States as to what it wanted to do at any point, they just took it for granted that there was so much power that you can't think of anything but dividing it up.

Guernica: What would you like to see happen, going forward from now?

Ali Allawi: I don't think that you can pull out without leaving some kind of architecture of stability or security, not only in Iraq but in the region. Because I think the invasion and occupation of Iraq really upended power structures that had been in place for so long and had posed very serious threats not only to neighboring countries but inside Iraq. That's why you have this very violent response on the part of the dispossessed or disempowered groups, and the determination to maintain whatever gains have been made for the Shi'a. But all of this affects the region in a profound way.

Guernica: So are calls for withdrawal wrong in your view?

Ali Allawi: I think they are just too narrowly focused on American political calculations. Of course, this is what you are concerned about. But you have involved yourself, uninvited, in the affairs of the Middle East. And in this case you have changed certain historic imbalances—you've created another reality. Now you can't move away from that reality because of your own domestic conflicts. At the same time, we as Iraqis have to understand that this may very well happen. If you're comparing withdrawal to civil war, I don't think there's any link; I think American withdrawal may even diminish the violence. Not because there's a threat against the United States, but because the state itself is falling increasingly under the hands of sectarians. So, with the United States not being there that process would go faster.

Guernica: You say 'civil conflict'—but a civil *war* has clearly started.

Ali Allawi: Well, it's started, and I think it's about to end in some of the provinces. Because Baghdad is now primarily a Shi'a city.

It saddens me and sickens me that people who have suffered for such a long time could sink into this very narrow and very partisan—very sectarian—Hobbesian state.

Guernica: Do you see the sectarian violence spreading to other countries in the Middle East?

Ali Allawi: It can. Not violence but instability, and the basis of really deepening discrimination, yes. If we have a sectarian state in Iraq, and that seemed to be in some ways anti-Sunni, whatever that means, and allied in a broad sense with Iran, I think it will have a terrible effect on the Shi'a communities in the Gulf, especially in Saudi Arabia, because they will see [Shi'as] as fifth columnists. They're already being seen like that. So it can create a very dangerous instability in the region.

Guernica: Is there someone in the West, in the U.S. particularly or the U.K., who seems to get it on Iraq?

Ali Allawi: No.

Guernica: Not a soul?

Ali Allawi: No, because the whole thing boils down to... [laughs] I don't want to say I'm the only one. But the fact of the matter is that Iraqis see this in terms of personal or group interest. They don't see this in terms of national interest. And the United States sees it in terms of its effect on its domestic affairs. And every other country sees it from its own narrow point of view. So I think that it is essential that something happen here [in the U.S.], because that's where these things usually start, where—instead of looking at a military solution or reducing the argument to should-we-stay or should-we-not-stay—you have to really design what is the end state that you want. And Bush's constant refrain that "What I want

is an Iraq that defends itself and sustains itself” is just nonsense. It’s just too shallow to make any significant policy prescription.

Guernica: What would be involved in creating an “architecture of stability?”

Ali Allawi: Bush talks about the “fiction of Iraq.” What does he mean? Well, 20-25% of Iraq is outside the control of the central government by agreement—that’s the Kurdish section. The other part is in serious conflict between the Shi’as and the Sunnis, the Arabs. And the Shi’as are on the verge of dominating; I’m a Shi’a myself. And I do believe there should have been major steps taken to rectify the imbalances and injustices in the country. In order to do that, you have to create some kind of common citizenship. If these policies continue, we are strengthening the sectarian basis of the state and at the same time the rejection [of the state].

Guernica: What’s the predominant emotion that overrides you when you think about this invasion that you were on record opposing—and you’ve watched it up close and noted mistep after mistep? Is it anger, regret?

Ali Allawi: It started with perplexity. How can this be happening? How can you send not just kids but people who have no interest in the country? And, I mean, how can you compare the greats who managed the reconstruction of Europe and Japan to this motley crew? And that turned to anger.

Guernica: And now?

Ali Allawi: Now it’s more like: what were you thinking? I mean, I don’t feel personally responsible, I don’t feel culpable, but I can’t absolve—I was involved or connected with governments that I knew were not up to the task. I’m not trying to be elitist, but really they were not up to the task. It saddens me and, to some extent, sickens me that people who have suffered for such a long time as exiled politicians (because most Iraqis in exile have some story of horrors to tell) could just sink into this very narrow and very partisan, very sectarian Hobbesian state. Disgust is not the right word but [thinking a few seconds] sorrow mixed with indignation.

Guernica: There’s a telling moment in your book where Paul Bremer, in the beginning of his tenure as head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, would get on TV and try to use the buzzwords neocons use at home like *freedom* and *liberty*. You write that they didn’t translate very well into Iraqi Arabic...

Ali Allawi: It’s like if you get some guy from the tribal hinterland to give some speech here [in the U.S.] and have it translated, really it’s as absurd as that. His connecting point was these few westernized types who are not sufficiently sceptical of their westernization, who cannot look at themselves and see that they don’t really represent the entire Iraqi experience.