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To save Iraq, open up the green zone

Former Iraqi minister Ali Allawi, a frontline witness to the terrible descent of his country, offers Marie Colvina radical rescue plan

Ali Allawi was Iraq's finance minister after the American invasion toppled Saddam Hussein, but he had anything but the kind of desk job that such posts entail in other countries.

Unlike most ministers and foreigners in Baghdad, Allawi refused to live in the green zone, the four square miles of fortified compound in the centre that has taken on all the trappings of small-town America. His decision almost cost him his life – his convoy was ambushed by snipers as he drove to work and he survived only because his bodyguards opened up with heavy machineguns from the car behind him.

"I didn't even have time to be frightened," Allawi, a dapper 60, said last week, sitting in his town house in Kensington. "The clatter of heavy machineguns and the pinging of spent cartridges bouncing all over the place was so loud that it was impossible to think," he said. "I didn't even count how many bullets hit my car." He lost treasured employees to assassins and suicide bombers.

Allawi's recent biography traces the trajectory of how the overthrow of Saddam and the occupation of Iraq went so badly wrong. His book *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace*, published by Yale University Press, is by far the best account of the calamitous descent from the widespread euphoria of the early days that followed the fall of Saddam's regime to the corruption, savagery and wild incompetence that have characterised its recent history.

What Allawi does not say in his self-effacing memoir is that he is exactly the type of Iraqi desperately needed in the country, a well-educated technocrat (he was educated at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and obtained his MBA from Harvard) who understands the West and the modern world but has kept his Iraqi roots.

After his term as minister of finance in 2005-06, when he found an astonishing \$800m hole in the budget, Allawi left in despair. His country, which Washington vowed to drag kicking and screaming into the world of democracy and secular liberalism, to be followed by the rest of the Middle East, had descended into a faction-ridden hell divided along sectarian lines.

What would he do first to correct the terrible slide? First he said, in temperate tones that disguise the radicalism of the idea, he would dismantle the green zone and get the Iraqi government out from behind its concrete blast walls. It is a probably dangerous prescription, but with it Allawi puts his finger on the biggest symbolic irritant to all Baghdadis.

The green zone takes up a huge chunk of the centre of the city, along the nicest stretch of the river, barring Iraqis from exactly the same area Saddam made off limits for his palaces, monuments and administrative buildings. The American embassy is in Saddam's old palace, complete with coffee bars and pizza parlours.

Green zone inhabitants call everything outside the security gates – the whole country these days – the red zone. Worst, Allawi thinks, is that most of the Iraqi government lives and works behind its walls. “It’s a bubble environment,” he said. He has the credentials to criticise; as a minister, he woke at 4.30am in the Mansour district, worked at home and then drove into the green zone, returning through the dangerous streets late at night. “Everyone inside is divorced from what the rest of the country experiences – power outages, filthy streets, kidnappings, shootings, killings and bombings.”

When he returned to Iraq in 2003 (he’d left as a boy, shortly after the 1958 revolution) he was already aware of the size of the reconstruction task. “I drove from Kuwait up the Euphrates and the landscape was completely alien,” he says. “I saw the wreckage, and how scruffy Iraq looked with the hulks of government buildings and trash in the streets. People seemed dazed.”

He had spent decades working by day in banking, and writing opposition tracts by night because, he said: “I believe in justice. You don’t want to see people subjected to injustice. The Ba’ath regime was a brutal, authoritarian regime.” Then for three years, he was at the centre of power in Baghdad, leaving his family behind in Britain. He describes the evolution of his feelings as “first perplexed, then concerned, then angry”. Most devastating to him was that having overthrown Saddam, the Americans had no plan. “They thought they could whistle their way through it,” he says now. “It was shockingly, terribly offhanded.” The worst, he believes, is that the West “invaded without conquering” the Sunni-based Ba’athist regime of Saddam, leaving the dictator’s disenfranchised former supporters as a sullen, willing pool of human resources for what would become a full-blown insurgency.

He is articulate in his criticism; his book is a text for what not to do in a postwar environment. “Nobody in the Coalition Provisional Authority [the American-led government of Iraq] wanted to undermine the simplistic American thinking about Iraq,” Allawi said.

“It went: the invasion of Iraq was liberation; the vast majority of people welcomed the coalition; Iraqis who resisted were standing against the forces of freedom; reconstruction and prosperity were just around the corner.”

Paul Bremer, who presided over the birth and entrenchment of the insurgency that today is tearing apart Iraq, was good at micro-managing but didn’t have a strategy. “He knew how to drive a car, but he didn’t know where he was going,” Allawi said.

Bremer seemed to have no awareness of what Allawi was all too familiar with: that 30 years of brutal dictatorship, one-party rule and the militarisation of the society would free bottled-up passions and thwarted national aspirations of Iraq’s different main communities of Sunni, Sh’ite and Kurd.

Allawi does not blame only the Americans and the West. He is an equal opportunity critic and takes aim as well at Iraqis, especially the exiles who returned and had a chance to create a new country. He supported the invasion and overthrow of Saddam but found it hard to stand by his ethical justification as the situation unravelled. He points to the government he was in. When elected national assembly members should have been concentrating on writing a constitution, they spent three months bickering and manoeuvring for high-level positions. Compromises and deals took precedence over the qualities of ministers; appointees were “indifferent”.

Allawi said the Americans tried and failed to create what they wanted to be a parallel security system that would be answerable to Washington, preferably led by someone who would respond to a “wink, wink”. That failure, he thinks, was a good thing; but despite being a Shi’ite himself he is critical of the interior minister Bayan Jabr who allowed the large-scale infiltration by Shi’ite militias and even death squads into the ministry’s ranks.

His deepest disappointment however, is in how Iraq has divided along sectarian lines. “There was the possibility to create a secular state,” he said, insisting that while there was no doubt that the discrimination against the majority Shi’ite population under Saddam had to be rectified, that did not mean the current divided system was the preferred option. “Now appointments are being made on a sectarian basis.”

Allawi is not without hope. “I believe the stage can be set for an informed public to demand the necessary changes in policy and direction, to begin to set things right.” In his quiet way, Allawi reflects the average Iraqi citizen; standing back, hoping against experience so far for a reprieve from power blackouts, petrol queues and water shortages, and the lawlessness, violence and death that make up daily life in Iraq.