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In Iraq, freedom is marching backward

Glenn Greenwald

9/15/2009

Muntadar al-Zaidi, the Iraqi journalist who famously threw his shoes at George W. Bush last year, was released from prison yesterday after 9 months (the person who invaded and shattered al-Zaidi's country and caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands of his fellow citizens hasn't suffered and almost certainly won't suffer any consequences). Al-Zaidi claims he was tortured in prison (just some beatings, whippings, electrical shocks, and "simulated drownings" -- nothing a few Yoo memos, some *New York Times*/NPR linguistic whitewashing, and Looking-Forward-Not-Backward mantras can't take care of). He also plans to go into hiding out of fear that he will be hunted down and murdered by U.S. intelligence agents who are still occupying his country:

He also said he feared US intelligence services regarded him as an "insurgent revolutionary" and would "spare no effort" in a bid to kill him.

"I want to warn all my relatives and people close to me that these services will use all means to trap and try to kill and liquidate me either physically, socially or professionally," he said.

I wonder how many Americans, and specifically American journalists, regard al-Zaidi's fear as irrational hysteria of the type for which "the Arab Street" is notorious -- like those raving Arab conspiratorial paranoids who, prior to the invasion, actually believed that the U.S. wanted to establish permanent military bases in that country rather than attacking Iraq in order to spread love and democracy with its Freedom Bombs. Those Arab crazies even doubted that Saddam was in cahoots with Al Qaeda even though our leading Middle East experts, such as Jeffrey Goldberg, proved this time and again; they just don't think as rationally as we do.

As Chris Floyd reminds us this morning, it is well-established that the U.S. has indeed created "death squads" inside Iraq to kill anyone it perceives to be an "insurgent":

[In 2008, Bob] Woodward revealed -- or, rather, confirmed -- the existence of what he called the key element to the "success" of Bush's escalation of the war crime in Iraq: a "secret

killing program" aimed at assassinating anyone arbitrarily deemed a "terrorist" by the leaders of the foreign forces occupying the conquered land.

In a TV appearance to puff the book, Woodward celebrated the arbitrary murder, by methods unknown, of people designated "terrorists," by criteria unknown, as "a wonderful example of American ingenuity solving a problem in war, as we often have"

And this despite the fact that, as Woodward makes clear, the targets of the American death squads are not merely "terrorists," as the general public broadly understands the term -- i.e., religious extremists in the al Qaeda mold -- but anyone arbitrarily designated an "insurgent" or a leader in "the resistance." That is, anyone who resists the invasion and occupation of his native land is deemed a legitimate target for a secret death squad. For execution without charges, without trial, without evidence. And this, to Woodward, is "wonderful" and "amazing."

It would probably be more irrational for al-Zaidi not to have the fears he has than to have them.

One of the things the Washington political class now tells itself to justify its support for the invasion is that, while things may not have gone as well as we would have liked for the first five years or so, at least we've created a better country for Iraqis (*why aren't they more grateful?*) and left a fledgling, spunky democracy in the middle of that region that will provide an excellent example for everyone around them. Except, as *The Economist* details this week (h/t Floyd), that really isn't true:

Could a police state return?

The Shia-led government has overseen a ballooning of the country's security apparatus. Human-rights violations are becoming more common. In private many Iraqis, especially educated ones, are asking if their country may go back to being a police state.

Old habits from Saddam Hussein's era are becoming familiar again. Torture is routine in government detention centres. "Things are bad and getting worse, even by regional standards," says Samer Muscati, who works for Human Rights Watch, a New York-based lobby. His outfit reports that, with American oversight gone (albeit that the Americans committed their own shameful abuses in such places as Abu Ghraib prison), Iraqi police and security people are again pulling out fingernails and beating detainees, even those who have already made confessions. A limping former prison inmate tells how he realised, after a bout of torture in a government ministry that lasted for five days, that he had been relatively lucky. When he was reunited with fellow prisoners, he said he saw that many had lost limbs and organs.

The domestic-security apparatus is at its busiest since Saddam was overthrown six years ago, especially in the capital. . . . Journalists are prominent victims of Iraq's judicial system. In July one was arrested for photographing a Baghdad traffic jam, after his pictures were deemed "negative" for mocking Mr Maliki's assertion that life in the capital was improving. Last year Iraq dropped to 158th place out of 173 -- its lowest ranking since the American invasion -- in a press-freedom table drawn up by Reporters Without Borders, a Paris-based lobby, which detects a decline in freedom in many countries.

The government recently announced plans to censor imported books as well as the internet, saying it wanted to ban hate screeds and pornography. But human-rights monitors fear this may presage a first step towards a wider web of censorship.

Freedom is on the march.

So what was accomplished by the whole venture? Aside from the grotesque immorality, criminality, loss of innocent life and the disappearance of untold billions upon billions of dollars, the only real change seems to be that we replaced one brutal tyrant with another, although the one that used to be there at least was an enemy of and check against our Current Enemy (Iran, the nation against whom Tom Friedman assures us we are waging a new Cold War), while the one that is there now is a strong ally, perhaps even a client, of those Persian Hitlers. So -- other than finding an excellent way to prop up our National Security State -- the one thing we "accomplished" with the invasion of Iraq was to provide the largest possible benefit to the country that is supposedly our Greatest Enemy.

We never learn the lesson, because we don't want to, that things don't work out well when we invade, bomb, occupy and try to re-make other countries. Does anyone believe that, if and when we stop waging war in Afghanistan, the results will be any better?