

War of the rentier states - Eqbal Ahmad



Eqbal Ahmad sums up the discussion on the Iran-Iraq war.

DURING ALL THE YEARS of war between Iran and Iraq, there has been one element of common ground between the combatants: in both countries there is a pretence that this is a war against imperialism and a war of imperialism. This is a lie. For whatever one may call the Iran-Iraq war, it stretches anti-imperialist reasoning to call it an imperialist war. It is evidently true that the US initially encouraged Iraq in its aggression. But encouragement should not be confused with involvement. None of the great powers - whether the Soviet Union, Britain, France or the US - appears to have had any role in initiating the war, or for that matter in conducting it. That the capitalist countries have profited from it and are continuing to profit from it does not make it an imperialist war.

There are several points which need to be made. First, this is a war of local ambitions: President Saddam Hussein's opportunism and regional reaction to Iran's revolutionary promise were responsible for Iraq's initial aggression in 1980. The primary responsibility for this war, then, must lie with at least two people and two governments. The horrors of the war and its losses must be attributed to two generalized forces and to two individuals. The two generalized forces are nationalism and the post-colonial state, which have more to do with the Iran-Iraq war than does imperialism. And the two individuals, namely Saddam Hussein and Ayatollah Khomeini, have a great deal to do with the war, one for starting the aggression and the other for prolonging the agony.

Second, the great powers have undoubtedly played a significant role in prolonging the war. While they did not initiate it, they have alternatively leaned towards each side as it appeared to be losing, in order to avoid an outright victory for either. That was true, for instance, of the US at the beginning of the war: sensing that Iran was in deep trouble, and that the Iraqi forces were pushing ahead, Washington looked the other way as US operatives sold supplies to Iran, and in fact promoted and gave a certain monopoly to the Israelis in supplying spare parts and small arms to Iran, just enough to keep the war going and prevent Iran's defeat. When Iran made its rebound (which was by no means because of the support from Israel or the US, as the Iraqis would have us believe: the primary reason was that Iran had a well-mobilized and revolutionary mass, its territories were under attack and it fought back) and the tables were being turned, all the great powers - the Soviet Union, the US, France and everybody else became very interested in helping Iran, so that Iraq would not be defeated. Thus it is clear that by merely trying to prevent the defeat of either side, the superpowers have helped to prolong the war. One could conclude

from this, and also from the example of the 1965 war between India and Pakistan, that in the Third World imperialism does not like to see a winner.

Third, the logic of regional politics and geopolitical realities in the Middle East have severely limited, though not eliminated, the role of the great powers in the Iran-Iraq conflict. The United States, the most activist of the great powers, has refrained from intervening because it does not have a sure client in either Iran or Iraq; because its logistical lines would be dangerously extended in case of a substantive riposte from the USSR; and because American congressional and public support for such an intervention is lacking. The Soviet Union, still involved in Afghanistan, anxious over events in Poland and sceptical of the left forces in Iran, has been acting with its customary combination of opportunism and caution. Hence the basic logic of the war remains regional and local.

What, then, are some of the lessons of the war? One basic lesson to be drawn is that we, as Middle Eastern peoples, live in societies which suffer from a disastrous separation between political power and civil society. And when such a separation occurs, it produces societies which are not productive, creative, democratic or lively. Personalism has reached a hitherto unexperienced pinnacle in our countries, so that the war is not really a war between Iran and Iraq, it is a Saddam-Khomeini war. It is a person-to-person war in which entire nations, entire peoples, are being made to pay the price of the criminal ambitions of one minority government and crazy individual and the mindless stubbornness of another. That is the fact, but why are such individuals able to get away with it? They are able to get away with it because both men, for different reasons and in different ways, have been able to establish a total separation between their power and the civil society. Muhammad Ja'far was correct in saying that the two defining symbols of this war have been the human wave attacks by Iran, and the use of chemical weapons by Iraq. Both refer to one tragedy, and both define one attitude - the attitude of not caring about the cost of their ambitions, and their ideological arrogance as regards the common people, especially the young. Both indicate moreover a lack of thought; they cannot figure out a strategy, they cannot figure out diplomatic manipulations or intelligent manoeuvres, so they turn to brute attack: human waves and chemical weapons. Both reveal a certain callousness towards the mass of humanity with whose lives these men are playing - and I use the word men specifically.

Another noteworthy fact is that the Middle Eastern states have evinced deep, if unworthy, interest in the outcome of this war. From Morocco to Pakistan, Middle Eastern governments have shown greater interest in preserving the status quo than in defending national sovereignty and independence, or serving the common good. So Saudi Arabia has expended much greater sums of money in saving the precious skin of Saddam Hussein than it has been willing to do to save the lot of the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. Or to protect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of an Arab country called Lebanon. Or even to protect the sovereignty of Jerusalem and assure access for both Muslims and Christians to the sacred city. While it was Saddam's ambition that initiated the war, it is the Arab states, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Morocco, which have sustained him through these years of senseless conflict. Their solidarity betrays the simple fact that the fear of upsetting the status quo is much greater than the question of history, or of sovereignty, or the question of humanity and the costs to common people. It is clearly not their love for Saddam Hussein but their fear of change, their anxiety over the consequences of a ruler having to pay for his mistakes, that have kept the Iraqi president in power, thereby prolonging this personalized war.

We have also seen through this war the harmful effects of the emergence of rentier states in the Middle East and North Africa. By the rentier state, I mean the state that has become rich on the basis of one product; or rather, one source of profit, since in the Middle East only the peasants and some artisans produce anything. The elite profit a great deal without producing. They buy machines without technology. They have oil, gas and other minerals. Some foreign company comes and extracts it for them. It puts a rentier regime in power; that regime doesn't need its people. Its elite doesn't need to work even to exploit the people properly. Because it doesn't need a tax base. And when a regime doesn't need a tax base, it

loses literally all organic links to the civil society. And it loses any reason for maintaining accountability to the people, to society, to history itself. A rentier state is an entity suspended in time, detached from politics, disengaged from history.

Fourth, I wish to underline that, with dramatic intensity and at the highest cost, this war has demonstrated the damage inflicted on the Third World by the merchants of death, namely the armaments industry of the First World. The Iran-Iraq war has yielded a sobering demonstration of the harm done to us by the arms trade. The arms trade in our time is the twentieth-century equivalent of the slave trade in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. We have to find ways to stop this horror, to ban it. The arms trade and the arms habit of our leaders must be abolished. The two sides in this war have poured billions of dollars into killing each other; the same regimes dread the typewriter. It is not widely known that the possession of a typewriter in Iraq requires a special licence. In Iran, on the other hand, you cannot sing an ordinary song and even the words of Ferdowsi, for centuries the greatest of Persian poets, are banned and censored.

This takes me to the fifth point. There is a frightening absence on the world scale of any mechanism to pursue or ensure peace in the world.

This senseless war has been going on for 7 years and the world has watched callously and with indifference. The United Nations, which pretends to be concerned (and probably is concerned), has been reduced to an expensive cipher. Because it lacks the support on this issue both of the superpowers and of the constituted governments that make up its membership, it is entirely dependent on the mutual interests of the Iranian and Iraqi governments. After countless trips, the UN delegation was finally able to get both sides to agree - which is a very great achievement under the circumstances - not to hit each other's civilians. At present the UN is sitting tight, hoping that it will be in the interest of both sides to reach at least those minor agreements that would give us a no-war, no-peace situation, a kind of institutionalized stalemate.

The world will not be safe to live in as long as, through the power of public opinion and the power of movements, we do not produce new institutions, and new ways of ensuring peace between madmen who drag in large numbers of decent people, because they are powerless.

What interests has the war served? First, the regime in Iran has profited. As of 1980, it had nothing to show for the great revolution that had occurred in Iran. The Nicaraguan revolution occurred at about the same time as the Iranian revolution - Somoza went to Florida at about the same time as the Shah left Iran. By 1980, that is, a year and a half to two years later, Nicaraguan revolutionaries were able to show UNESCO that the Nicaraguan literacy rate had risen from roughly 35 per cent to 85 per cent, a full-fledged land reform had been implemented a viable agrarian policy has been instituted. The Iranian revolution, in comparison with the Nicaraguan revolution, was richer and had a highly mobilized population; but its accomplishments did not compare either then or now with those of the Sandinista regime. Well-endowed Iran not only did not compare favourably with scarcity-ridden Nicaragua's accomplishments, but, worse, Iran had no programme. The Islamic Republic of Iran is still without a viable programme of social reconstruction. The Iraqi invasion helped Ayatollah Khomeini and his mullahs to mobilize popular support around nationalism: the regime can now claim that it has succeeded, at least temporarily, in consolidating power.

Second, the war has helped the elite in Iraq to profit from the war. The massive spending on war is going into buying arms, into infrastructure, into contracting and contacting - which is the business of Third World bourgeoisies. Businessmen on both sides of the war are getting rich. But the Iraqi elite has probably profited the most from subsidized war profiteering. The Arab world is paying the bill.

Third, great profit has accrued to Israeli contractors, acting on behalf of the Israeli government. The Israelis, very intelligently and with skilled American help, have cornered the market in spare parts and small arms to the Iranians. This is another irony of the Islamic Republic.

Fourth, the war has profited the superpowers and their multinational corporations, for obvious reasons. The losers are the two countries and their inhabitants. Their resources depleted, their cities destroyed and their economies in ruins, Iran and Iraq are countries of orphans and widows, of sacrificed youths whom those in power have entitled martyrs.

How long is this killing to go on? What are the prospects, and what are our obligations? I think the present prospect is one of endless-war, no-peace. Iran, in particular, would like to see a kind of stalemate that it could marginally institutionalize. Given Iran's population and resources, in the long run it stands a better chance to endure a stalemate. The Iraqis probably have no alternative to the stalemate either. Saddam Hussein's power is obviously more precious than Iraq's peace; and Ayatollah Khomeini won't grant peace unless President Hussein departs. What can we do? I think we ought to recognize several facts. One is that our responsibilities are greater than our capabilities. Our responsibility is great because the civil society in our part of the world has been suppressed. There used to be a saying in the old days of feudalism and the monarchies that there are two types of poet in the Muslim world, *sha 'er al-imama* and *sha 'er al-khelafa*: the poet of power and the poet of prophecy. In other words there was a literature of dissent and there was a literature of conformity to power -the poets who were located in the power establishment and those who belonged in the civil society. In a double entendre, the phrases also meant 'the poet behind' and 'the poet ahead'. The saying used to go further: that the *sha 'er al-imama* will usually be found in the 'provinces'; he is not likely to be found in the *dar al-khelafa* (capital; literally, the seat of power).

Our problem is that they have now abolished the 'provinces'. Modern communications, the capitalist economy, modern management techniques, have all brought the 'provinces' within easy reach of the repressive state. Earlier, Muhammad Ja'far was saying that politics has been abolished in Iraq, and the Ba'thists presided over its abolition. To a large extent, Ayatollah Khomeini is doing the same in Iran. The 'provinces' are not there, and the actual and potential 'poets of the provinces' have gone into exile, mostly to the capitalist metropolis, or are in prison if they are spared execution, or have been forcibly silenced. Our responsibilities are therefore very great. We must analyse, innovate, dissent. We need courage, which we have, and patience, which we do not always have. We must work very hard to keep the civil society alive, and to make alternatives appear viable and necessary. This meeting is a beginning. If we can get together, we may keep pushing forward, critically and honestly.