

America's "Justice" in Occupied Iraq: Why Tariq Aziz Should Be Released

By [Muriel Mirak-Weissbach](#)

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The appearance on August 5 of an interview with former Iraqi diplomat Dr. Tariq Aziz in the *Guardian* was a minor bombshell, whose repercussions were to be felt worldwide. Like an underground explosion, the interview sent waves throughout international waters, rocking many boats and reaching far distant shores. It was not only *what* the former top Iraqi diplomat said — although his brief statements were of utmost relevance — but the mere fact that he was allowed to speak out in public, which sent eerie signals across international diplomatic circuits.

Why?

Who Is Tariq Aziz?

Dr. Tariq Aziz served as Deputy Prime Minister between 1981 and 2003, and also at times as Foreign Minister. He is the highest ranking member of the former regime still in custody. After the invasion and occupation of Baghdad in 2003, he turned himself in to the U.S. authorities, unlike other members of the regime who fled. According to his own account, Dr. Tariq presented himself to the U.S. forces out of his own free will, on condition that his family be allowed to leave Iraq for Jordan, which permission was granted. Instead of being welcomed by the U.S. forces for his spontaneous gesture and accorded humane treatment, he was thrust into prison, and held de facto incommunicado for years. He was allowed no family visits and no contact with lawyers. Finally, in 2008 he was put on trial, and in March 2009 was sentenced to 15 years in prison on charges of having participated in the execution of merchants who had violated state price controls in 1992. He was also given a 7-year-sentence for forced relocation of Kurds. Earlier that month, he was found not guilty of killing Shi'ites in 1999. Though afflicted by diabetes, a heart condition, and emphysema, he was denied adequate medical attention or treatment, and left to rot in a dungeon. Repeated appeals by his family, his lawyers, and the Vatican for his release on humanitarian grounds were impudently ignored by the U.S. authorities.

His first approach to the Vatican for help was made in December 2004, and went through Father Jean-Marie Benjamin, a priest who had arranged a momentous meeting between Tariq Aziz and Pope John Paul II a year earlier, in an effort to prevent the war. Fr Benjamin received unofficial approval from Cardinal Angelo Sodano, the Vatican Secretary of State, and organized a group of Italian lawyers to provide legal assistance to Aziz, a Chaldean Christian, free of charge.

In January 2007, Aziz sent a letter through his Italian lawyer, Giovanni di Stefano, to Pope Benedict XVI, requesting that the Vatican act as a guarantor for him so that he might stay in

Italy while awaiting trial. When di Stefano was allowed to visit him in prison that month, he reported that his client was “coughing up blood” and called for a doctor. In January of this year, he was hospitalized after falling ill. It was later reported that he had suffered a stroke. On July 14 he was transferred along with at least 55 other former government officials to Iraqi custody. Days later he was summoned to court again and charged with squandering public wealth.

It was as part of the process of U.S. “withdrawal” and transfer of power to the Iraqi authorities that the 74-year-old Tariq Aziz entered his new prison regime. And under this new arrangement, politically shaped by the Iraqi government, he came to give an interview to a leading British daily. According to *Guardian* journalist Martin Chulov, preparations for the interview had taken several months. One not-better identified minister of the Iraqi government facilitated contacts for the interview.

In this, his first (and perhaps last) direct encounter with a representative of the world press, Dr. Tariq had a lot to say — and none of it could have pleased government circles in Washington, London, Baghdad, or other world capitals involved in the military conflicts between 1991 and 2003. Aziz laid bare a number of crucial facts, and identified, in warning tones, the dangers that the declared policy aims of the belligerents — the U.S.-led coalition forces — harbored for the nation and the region.

First he declared his innocence of any “crime against any civilian, military or religious man,” and asserted, “I am proud of my life because my best intention was to serve Iraq.” He did acknowledge that “There were mistakes ... there were things that were not completely correct,” without further details. He refrained from expressing regrets or criticizing his former president: “If I speak now about regrets,” he said, “people will view me as an opportunist. I will not speak against Saddam,” he went on, “until I am a free man. Wisdom is part of freedom. When I am free and can write the truth I can even speak against my best friend.” The one regret he did have was that he had surrendered. He recounts that, after having said farewell to Saddam Hussein and assured him his support, he made contact with the U.S. forces “through an intermediary”. “If I could return to that time,” he told the *Guardian*, “I wish I would be martyred. But the war was here and Baghdad had been occupied. I am loyal to my family and I made a major decision. I told the Americans that if they took my family to Amman they could take me to prison.” And that is what happened. Regarding the occupation, he is quoted (it is not clear when in the interview, since it appears in the title), saying, “Britain and the U.S. killed Iraq.” At the conclusion of his remarks, he said the occupying forces would be wrong to withdraw. “He [The U.S. president] cannot leave us like this,” he said. “He is leaving Iraq to the wolves. When you make a mistake you need to correct a mistake, not to leave Iraq to its death.”

His reference to what he would or would not say about Saddam Hussein might lead to speculation that, were he freed, he could be prevailed upon to denounce the former Iraqi president, essentially justifying ex post facto the horrendous wars and invasion from 1991 to 2003.

This is not, in my view, likely. Rather, what Tariq Aziz as a free man could tell the world is the true story behind those wars and embargo regimes. First: who looked the other way as Iraq prepared to invade Kuwait in 1990, and provided assurances that whatever actions it took against Kuwait’s monetary and oil price warfare would be treated by the U.S. as an internal Arab affair? The protocol of a meeting between then-U.S. Ambassador April Glaspie and Saddam Hussein is on the record, but Tariq Aziz could fill in a lot of the blanks.(1) Going

back even farther in time, he would be in a position to detail who encouraged Iraq to go to war against Iran in 1980, and who provided Baghdad the political, intelligence, and military backup, including chemical weapons.(2)

But, to stick to Desert Storm, the first direct Anglo-American assault on the country: Dr. Tariq could lay out step by step how the war preparations were perceived in Baghdad. After all, he was the one delegated by Saddam Hussein to meet with then-Secretary of State James Baker III in Geneva, ostensibly in a last-ditch attempt to avoid war. What appeared in the world press following that fateful January 9, 1991 meeting was the news that Baker III had threatened Aziz that, unless Iraq withdrew from Kuwait *toute suite*, his country would be “bombed back to the Stone Age.” Subsequent events confirmed that Baker was not bluffing.

Rendez-vous in Geneva

But what unfolded in that Geneva meeting was far more than what could be summarized in one vicious byte-sized threat by a superpower against a developing country. The full transcript of the meeting, which lasted for over 7 hours, is well worth studying, and in painstaking detail.(3) Now declassified, the official transcript reveals the real dimensions and contours of a conflict which had been falsely presented as a confrontation between the “West” (U.N.-U.S.-U.K. et al) and a wily regional power (Iraq), to reestablish justice after the unlawful invasion of Kuwait. No, the substance of the discussions that day in Geneva was quite another. It had relatively little to do with Kuwait. The real issue was Israel and the Palestinian question.

Baker made clear he was there to “communicate,” not “negotiate.” The thrust of his “communication” was that the crisis had begun with Iraq’s August 2 invasion of Kuwait, “an action condemned in twelve UNSC resolutions” which “don’t just condemn the act, they demand its reversal.” In a formulation he was to repeat several times, Baker stated, “We cannot negotiate the terms of those resolutions.” And, “the only question is by what path you leave Kuwait – a peaceful withdrawal, or withdrawal by force.” Referring to the “devastatingly superior fire-power and forces” that Iraq would face, were it to refuse, Baker pledged the conflict would “be fought to a swift, decisive conclusion.”

At the opening of the talks, Baker had handed Aziz a letter from President Bush to Saddam Hussein, which presumably “communicated” the same message. Aziz rejected the letter on grounds it was “full of expressions of threat,” and uncivilized.

The argument put forth by Aziz was that the crisis did *not* begin on August 2, but had its origins in a more distant past. He said that the U.S. had intended all along to deploy its unquestionable military might. Prior to August 2, Aziz said, there had been “full-scale propaganda against Iraq, abusing the Iraqi leadership,” and he cited a *U.S. News and World Report* article that characterized Saddam Hussein as “the most dangerous man in the world.” Furthermore, he said, “An economic embargo was in effect” with contracts on grain and agriculture frozen as far back as January 1990. In addition, Iraq was being threatened by Israel. “In March 1990,” he said, “we expected an Israeli attack against Iraq. Israel threatened to attack our industrial and technological installations.” It was in response, then, that “On April 2, Saddam Hussein said that if Israel attacked us, we would retaliate and burn half of Israel.” Most significantly, Aziz specified: “We were talking about an Israeli *nuclear* hit.” He elaborated that Saddam had threatened to use “binary chemical weapons” if Israel were to attack Iraq with *nuclear* weapons (emphasis added). This was what the Iraqi president communicated to Senator Dole and others in Mosul at the time – a fact Baker

immediately questioned. (It was that April 2 statement by Saddam Hussein that apparently led to the charge that he was “the most dangerous man in the world.”)

Referring to discussions he had had with U.S. leaders in October 1989 as well as to debate at the May 30, 1990 Baghdad Summit, Aziz summed up the situation as it appeared to Iraq at the time: “So the picture in 1990 was one of Israeli threats to Iraq with the prospect of a war between Israel and Iraq, and an Israeli threat against Jordan, and an Israeli threat to the Palestinian people....” On top of this came the economic warfare launched by Kuwait, which had flooded the oil markets, triggering a drop in the oil price from \$21 a barrel to \$11 a barrel. Iraq was “on the verge of economic collapse,” Aziz said. Despite an agreement struck at a meeting of oil ministers to return to quota levels, “the Kuwaiti oil minister issued a statement after the meeting which said Kuwait would go back to the old position in two months’ time.” Aziz concluded: “What he was saying constituted war against Iraq.” Thus the move against Kuwait was in self-defense.

Significantly, it was at this point that Tariq Aziz made an interesting offer to Baker, to cooperate to reach a “just, comprehensive and lasting peace for the whole region,” and added that, unless the Palestinian issue were resolved, “our security in Iraq will continue to be threatened.” Aziz concluded his case by rejecting the double standard used by the US. “There are other UN resolutions to be implemented,” he said, obviously referring to those condemning Israel’s occupation of Palestinian lands. “But there are no forces sent to implement them.”

Baker’s response arrogantly ignored the entire content of the Iraqi’s presentation, and seized only on the last point. “We have no double standard on UNSC resolutions,” Baker barked, and proceeded to develop a formalistic interpretation of UNSC resolutions. “You are aware that the resolutions of the Arab-Israeli conflict provide *principles for negotiations*. They don’t require *immediate unconditional withdrawal* as do the resolutions on Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait”(emphasis added). Not only on the formal level did Baker defend the double standard, but in substance; he went on to develop a full defense of Israel’s actions, including the 1967 war.

“We don’t pursue a double standard on enforcing UN resolutions,” he said, “or on weapons of mass destruction.” Then came the astonishing assertion: “You know Israel was the subject of aggression and occupied the territories as a result of a war waged against it; they occupied the territories as the result of defending against a war imposed on them.” Aziz’s response was a classical understatement: “I have great reservations about your description.”

Baker was adamant. When Aziz stated that “Israel’s occupation in 1967 was a result of flagrant military aggression against the Arab world,” Baker called on Dennis Ross to educate Aziz on the 1967 war, “since he [Ross] has studied this.” Ross’s studied version had it that Egypt was threatening Israel, and that therefore “Israel didn’t wait to be attacked. It hit Egypt, and asked Jordan to stay out of the war....”

Several times during the meeting, Aziz proposed cooperation with the U.S. to prevent a new war and to jointly establish a new world order based on justice. Solving the Palestinian issue – the “mother of all problems” – would be at the center of such a “comprehensive settlement,” he said. Early in the conversation, Aziz referred to a proposal Saddam Hussein had made to Senator Dole to agree on the elimination of all weapons of mass destruction in

the region, including Israel's. At the height of the crisis on August 12, 1990, Saddam, in fact, had announced that if Israel withdrew from the occupied territories, an arrangement could be found for Kuwait.

In an effort to settle the current crisis over Kuwait peacefully, Aziz proposed regional talks: "if military action were to happen," he argued, "then all parties in the region will take part. Why not have them sit before the war? If these parties take part, after a while, the war will end.... But after it ends, will the region be left in peace? Will the region be left for more wars? If the answer is, there must be peace, those parties must sit together to make peace. So why not do it now?" And he added: "Not just Iraq and the United States, but the other parties that will take part – the US, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the others." Yes – *he also said "Israel."*

Baker responded with characteristic sarcasm, saying, well, if that were the case, then why hadn't all the parties "sat together" on this or that or the other date in the past? Similarly, when Aziz proposed that he go to Washington to discuss the crisis directly with President Bush and report back to Saddam Hussein, Baker dismissed it as too little, too late.

Time and again in the talks, Aziz brought up the 1967 war, and Israel's occupation as well its annexations of Palestinian land, and complained that the U.S. had never upheld any relevant UNSC resolutions: "The fact is that you have always given Israel political protection through your veto." Baker repeatedly denied holding a double standard. The session broke up in an atmosphere of tense animosity.

In a later interview, Baker essentially admitted that the meeting had been a set-up, aimed at allowing the U.S. "to be seen in the judgment of history as not having left any stone unturned in the pursuit of peace." Asked if this were a "plot to avoid the war," Baker said no, since the decision had already been made. "[T]he meeting with Tariq Aziz in Geneva permitted us to achieve congressional support for something that the President was determined to do in any event...."(4)

The Lessons of Geneva

Studying these documents confirmed me in my belief that Desert Storm had little or nothing to do with Kuwait, but everything to do with a U.S.-U.K.-Israeli commitment to a new policy for the region. That blueprint for a New World Order was the strategic plan adopted by Benjamin Netanyahu in 1996 as his government policy, known as the Clean Break. It entailed a break with the 1993 Oslo Accords negotiated with the Palestinians and a return to an aggressive policy of confrontation, occupation, settlements, and annexations. Regionally, it called for regime change in every country deemed hostile to Israel (Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Iran), so as to allow it regional hegemony (and implicitly a nuclear monopoly). Since then, there has been regime change in Iraq, (which was the foremost Arab champion of Palestinian rights), and the Israeli wars against Lebanon and Gaza.

None of this is the stuff of academic debate. It is immediately relevant today. For, the same Netanyahu again prime minister in Israel is hell-bent for leather on pursuing the strategic aims of Clean Break, this time by taking on Iran, the last target on the list, with the pretext of eliminating it as a potential nuclear military threat. Reams of articles flooded the internet over the last months on this war danger, and a group of leading former intelligence and

military personnel in the U.S. wisely issued a public demand to the White House that it prevent such an apocalyptic move.⁽⁵⁾ This broad exposure of the Israeli war plan and intervention by U.S. intelligence officials directly addressing Obama had some effect. On August 19, the *New York Times* reported that Gary Samore, Obama's leading advisor on nuclear matters, had gone on record saying that it would take Iran a year to develop a weapons capability. But what was the purpose of this announcement? To signal to Israel to wait one more year. Almost simultaneously, on August 20, U.S. Secretary of State Clinton said she was inviting Israel and the Palestinians to resume direct peace talks. The coincidence is striking; one hypothesis is that the war faction is staging peace talks to curry favor with the Arabs, all in preparation of the move against Iran – one year from now.

Tariq Aziz and War Prevention

Tariq Aziz represents a valuable asset in the effort to stop a new war. Were he freed, through a concerted international campaign, he could speak out and educate world public opinion on what the nature of the Great Game in the region has been over the past three decades at least. Truth has a way of clearing the air. His personal testimony regarding developments involving Iraq, Iran, the U.S., the U.K., Europe, and regional forces since 1980 could blow the lid off the official cover stories related to the conflicts in that period.

Certainly this is the main reason why Aziz, unlike many other members of the Saddam Hussein regime, has been kept in custody, his guardians obviously waiting for him to exit this life and enter the next. Former colleagues of his, be it a former Foreign Minister, or an Information Minister, among many diplomats, are now resting comfortably (some as millionaires, I am told), in Dubai or Abu Dhabi or Amman. Perhaps they made a pact with Mephistopheles to refrain from writing memoirs, in exchange for an easy life in exile. Tariq Aziz is not that sort of person. On the two occasions that I met him personally, in 1991 and in 1994 in Baghdad, while part of a humanitarian aid effort, I was impressed by his modesty, his intelligence, his personal commitment to defend his nation and people, and above all his deep disappointment that the U.S. — considered Iraq's ally over decades — had so betrayed their trust, and deliberately destroyed his nation. Tariq Aziz is a precious resource in the pursuit of truth and political justice.

Iraqi Internal Politics

Why was Tariq Aziz allowed to give the *Guardian* such an interview?

One can only make a few educated guesses on the basis of known facts. First, it occurred *after* his transfer to the Iraqi authorities, who appear to be treating him better than the Americans did. He mentions in the interview that he has comfortable quarters, friendly guards, and weekly telephone access to his family. Secondly, the interview appeared in the midst of a prolonged political crisis following parliamentary elections. Iyad Allawi, whose secular nationalist faction had won a slim majority over Prime Minister Nuri al Maliki's group, was also contacted by the *Guardian*, and informed of the upcoming interview. "Tell Tariq Aziz that he is my friend and I think of him often," Allawi is quoted saying. "He is a good man and I know his family well. I wish him all the best and it is wrong to lock him up like this for so long. He is an old man."

In an interview with the German weekly *Der Spiegel*, published August 29, Allawi elaborated on his forecast for Iraq: either Iraq "starts political reconciliation, builds full-blown state institutions and security forces and creates an independent foreign policy," or Iraq will

become prey again to civil war – this time without multinational forces on the ground to prevent the worst. Asked about Tariq Aziz’s warning, that after the occupiers left, the country would be left to the wolves, Allawi answered: “He means the predators that have been unleashed all over the Middle East, the lawless people and the terrorists who want to spill as much blood as possible on as many places as possible.”

Allawi’s overall assessment of the failure of U.S. policy is devastating and on the mark. In Iraq, he said, “The biggest mistake committed by the Iraqi government and the multinational forces was to let down the Sahwa forces — the tribal movement which was so decisive in the fight against al-Qaida. They have not been integrated; they have been disenfranchised and pushed back into despair and poverty. This will have consequences.” Furthermore, U.S. strategy for the region has been a failure: in Afghanistan, “it is a total failure. The problem here is not about America leaving Iraq and continuing its fight in Afghanistan. America has to rethink its strategy for the whole region from Central Asia to the Middle East. NATO will have to rethink its strategy and so will Europe.”

Regarding possible agreement on power-sharing, Allawi stressed that, since all power is invested in the Prime Minister, a way must be found to share that power between two political forces. He expressed optimism that Shi’ite militia and political leader Muqtadar al Sadr, whom he had opposed in the past, could and would play a positive role as a nationalist Iraqi. His last comments dealt with Iran, and the enormous fear gripping the region that a new conflict, which he compared to the 1962 Cuba crisis, may break out. Allawi’s advice to the U.S. et al: “the world should engage and talk with Iran, and try to see and feel where the fears of Iran lie. The Iranians are logical people. We should try to convince them that proliferation does not serve their purpose in the end.” He concluded by saying a war over Iran’s nuclear program was “a very high possibility.”

Parallels to Iran

Both Tariq Aziz and Iyad Allawi have provided valuable insights into the past, present, and future of their tortured country. Although they do not make the connection in such an explicit form, the danger of new wars in the region is intimately linked to the policy followed since 1996 by the U.S., U.K., and Israel.

And the parallels to the current crisis are outstanding: just as Saddam Hussein in Tariq Aziz’s account was denounced a public enemy number one for his threats to retaliate against a threatened Israeli nuclear attack, so today Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is demonized for having allegedly threatened to wipe Israel off the map. This, nota bene, came in response to repeated Israeli threats to bomb Iran’s nuclear facilities. Iraq in both pre-war situations (1990 and 2003) was falsely accused of having weapons of mass destruction; today, against evidence to the contrary documented by the IAEA, Iran is condemned for its alleged nuclear weapons program. Just as Saddam Hussein had offered cooperation with the U.S. and others, to reach a regional peace settlement, based on a weapons of mass destruction free zone (including Israel) and a comprehensive peace between the Palestinians and Israel, so has the Islamic Republic of Iran repeatedly over the past seven years (at least) made concrete proposals for regional peace, security, and stability. The “grand bargain” which Iran offered the U.S. under the Khatami presidency was not only rejected out of hand. Washington had the chutzpah to claim it had never received any such offer. Recent offers by Ahmadinejad for direct talks with the U.S. on all open issues have been ignored, and not only because his rhetorical style may be deemed offensive to the West.

So it is clear that the war party in the U.S., U.K., and Israel, which brought us the tragedies of Desert Storm and Enduring Freedom (sic), is intent on igniting another war which, this time, would incinerate the entire region. Shedding light on how previous such bloody adventures have been orchestrated and forced on an unassuming world public opinion is of utmost importance. Therefore, Dr. Tariq Aziz should be freed.

Notes

1. Sa'adoon Al-Zubaydi, Saddam Hussein's official translator from 1987 to 1995(who also attended the Geneva meeting), gave an interview to Activist's Reader in April 2004, entitled "Lost in Translation," (www.activistsreader.org/articles%20folder/lost-in-translation.html), in which he reported: "I was present at all three meetings between Saddam and then U.S. Ambassador April Glaspie, during her three-year term. I can say with certainty that the Americans had in fact been notified of the intention to attack Kuwait, and responded with tacit acquiescence." One meeting took place on July 25th, and "Glaspie arrived breathless at the meeting.... But she had good news for us. It was a message for Saddam from President Bush [senior]. 'It is not U.S. policy to interfere in inter-Arab affairs,' she said to us in English."
2. On Iran, Al-Zubaydi had the following to say: "Saddam felt betrayed by Israel after the bombing of the nuclear reactor of Osiraq in June of 1981. 'I wage war on Iran, which is dangerous for the entire Middle East, and they repay me by stabbing me in the back?' he used to say." He also recalled a meeting between Saddam and the U.S. assistant secretary of state for the Near East, Richard Murphy, about an Iraqi missile that had accidentally hit a U.S. frigate, killing 37. "I remember my surprise," translator Al-Zubaydi said, "when I learned that at the time, there was extensive exchange of intelligence between Washington and Baghdad during the war against Iran." In the Geneva meeting, Tariq Aziz also hinted at Iraqi-U.S. convergence in the Iran war: "Had we failed in confronting Iran," he said, "you would have sent your forces to confront Iran, not Iraq. So our force was a force made to maintain the balance in the area and to protect the security, stability, and wealth of the region, including your interests."
3. "US Department of State Memorandum of Conversation, Secretary James A. Baker III and Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz, Wednesday, January 9, 1991, Geneva, Switzerland, http://bakerinstitute.org/files/archive/vm_baker_aziz.pdf/view
4. Frontline: The Gulf War: Oral History: James Baker, www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/gulf/oral/baker/1.html
5. "Obama has been Warned that Israel May Bomb Iran: Memorandum to the President from former Intelligence Officials," by Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity, Global Research, August 4, 2010.

The author can be reached at mirak.weissbach@googlemail.com

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