

“It’s not ‘Regime Change’ America wants, but ‘Region Change.’”: Historic Interview With Tariq Aziz

“The Embargo Even Extends to Dialogue”:

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Author’s note: In context, this interview took place during the most draconian US-UK led UN sanctions ever imposed on a country, denying all essential to modern life, which had been in place for nine years and nine months.

Tariq Aziz doesn’t hide his anger and frustration when speaking of his country’s plight:

“This is a region of conflicts, upheavals, revolutions, but this is the first time such rigid and comprehensive sanctions have been imposed anywhere.

“Prior to the embargo we had a high standard of free education from primary school to university and free health care. But one cannot live alone in the world. Nations need to trade, to buy and sell. There has been a sharp deterioration in health, social services, electricity, clean water.”

Seated in his Baghdad office, Iraq’s Deputy Prime Minister lists countless further examples of the misery inflicted by sanctions, from how the collapse of the Dinar has slashed the income of once well paid professionals to the equivalent of \$3 a month, to the way the world’s former number one date producer is prohibited from selling its crop.

Aziz stresses that increasing the amount of oil that Iraq is allowed to sell under the oil-for-food arrangement to \$5.2 billion every six months does nothing to alleviate the situation: “Our oil industry cannot do it”, he says.

“They need new equipment, parts, extensive refurbishment. Even before recent further damage by bombing, we could pump less than \$2billion worth each six months. Forty percent of that goes to the UN. We are still paying for UNSCOM* which destroyed hundreds of factories and equipment, a number of whose Members are now exposed as spies. We also paying reparations to Kuwait and so on. We have nearly twenty three million inhabitants. We need \$16-18 billion a year plus export of commodities. Yet we are not allowed agricultural equipment to produce our own food, so we have to import.”

Ironically it was the UN Food and Agricultural Organization which advised Iraq that importing

the bulk of its food needs made better economic sense than trying to become self-reliant. In 1993, just three years in to the embargo, the (UN) World Food Programme warned that: "All the pre-famine indicators are now in place" in Iraq.

He recalls how James Baker ** told him during their famous pre-war meeting in Geneva that if Iraq did not comply with US demands: "We will reduce you to the pre-industrial age." "That remains the objective today", he asserts.

"In March '91, we were left with no telephones or electricity, no clean water, with the refineries either crippled or damaged, almost all the bridges bombed, thus the country virtually divided. But we rebuilt and restored to a certain degree. The government remained. But now there are almost daily bombardments with the same objective.

"In the December (1998) aggression, the US ignored the (UN) Security Council. Fifteen Members were formally meeting (to discuss Iraq) and the bombs were already falling."

Aziz contrasts Washington's refusal to talk to Baghdad with the increasingly receptive ears grievance against sanctions have been falling on in other world capitals. "When we go to the US we are not allowed to leave New York. Congressmen, old friends, must come to New York to see us. Even a minor official at the UN is not allowed a cup of tea in the lobby with an Iraqi official. The Embargo also extends to dialogue. Dialogue is the golden rule to finding solutions. Yet the US accuses us of being 'undemocratic' ", he says.

"Recently, President Chirac was denied permission to discuss Iraq with (President) Clinton, yet Paris is deeply involved and I can talk at any level with them, the Russians, the Chinese. Big delegations visit here and I recently travelled to Spain, Italy, Belgium and France. But sanctions are genocide. If the US wants to impose military sanctions on Iraq, let them do it, but don't deprive our children of milk, health, medicine."

He has no doubt why the US attitude:

" Iraq has the second largest oil reserves - actually the first. You can find oil wherever you drill in Iraq. The US wishes to dominate oil, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. They want to keep us dormant, to bring in a pro-US government and present that as bringing about 'democracy' and 'human rights.' We are a 'threat to peace and stability' and a 'threat to the region.' "

"Yet Saudi Arabia, run by just one man, is the darling of Washington. The irony is that the countries of the region are paying dearly, Saudi and Kuwait are paying - while we are the perceived 'threat' - for Americans to be on their soil."

But doesn't Iraq indeed pose a threat to its neighbours? What about human rights? Halabja? The Kurds? He replies that Iraq too feels threatened by US bases in the region, that the Kurds have a better deal than their Turkish counterparts, enjoying autonomy, official recognition and cultural rights. The truth about such matters, he intimates, is in the eye of the beholder.

"I have read stories in The Times that President Saddam shoots people in Cabinet meetings. How could he survive? Iraqis are quick to revolt as they did in 1921, 1931, 1947, 1957 and 1968."

So how is this impasse to be resolved?

"Why don't a cross-party group of US Congressmen come here, address our parliament, engage in dialogue, meet people? Misunderstandings arise from lack of dialogue. Even our Bishop" – Aziz is a Chaldean Christian – "cannot get in to the US to travel with a delegation. He has had to apply for a Vatican passport

"Last year, when I received an invitation from the Oxford Union, my visa was turned down by the UK. But shortly I am going to Ireland at the invitation of University College Dublin and they are connecting with the Oxford Union by TV, so we will belatedly have our debate – three ways.

As I rose to leave he said: "It is not 'regime change' America wants, but 'region change.' "

Then: "Madam Felicity, when I was ten years old, I was handing out leaflets in the streets of Baghdad, putting them through people's doors, to stop the British stealing our oil. I am not about to give up on Iraq now."

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