

One of Saddam's Men Speaks Out on the Elections

Interview with former Iraq Ambassador to the United Nations

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In-depth Report: [IRAQ REPORT](#)

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It's almost two years since the invasion of Iraq and the world has not been able to hear from any of the members of Saddam Hussein's regime, because of course they are all under lock and key, waiting to go on trial for hiding weapons of mass destruction they did not have and for colluding with Al Qaeda, which they did not do. I've often wondered what happened to Muhammad al-Douri (as I have spelled his surname). I had been in daily touch with him by e-mail and cellphone when he was Iraq's Ambassador to the United Nations in the last days before the March 2003 invasion, but lost touch with him when he left quickly for Europe on the day Baghdad fell.

We'd originally met through his predecessor at the UN, Nizar Hamdoon, who I'd known since I began looking into the allegations of Iraq's misdeeds in 1997. Hamdoon passed away last year, of cancer, and I'd been assured by the Iraqi U.N. Mission that al-Douri was okay. It was nice, though, to see this interview on the Al Jazeera English website this week. I would have missed it in my daily scan, but spotted his frowning visage. He's really a most pleasant fellow, a rather distinguished lawyer who joined the diplomatic corps to represent Iraq at the Human Rights Convention in Geneva. In case you wonder, I agree completely with him in this interview, that the recent elections are meaningless because they were arranged along sectarian, not nationalist lines. President Bush should read One of Saddam's Men Speaks Out. He would learn a thing or two.

Jude Wanniski

Iraq elections, democratic practice but ... by Ahmed Janabi

When Baghdad was occupied on 9 April 2003, the last Iraqi ambassador of Saddam Hussein's government to the UN, Muhammad al-Duri, declared that the game was over.

A journalist, university professor and statesman who served as an Iraqi delegate to the UN from 1999 to 2003, he left Iraq in 1999 to act as Iraq's ambassador to the UN in Geneva, Switzerland before he was moved to New York where he remained until he resigned after the occupation of Iraq.

Janabi: How do you feel about the elections?

al-Duri: Despite everything that has been said about its incompetence, it is still a democratic practice. It is part of a well-thought out US plan to implement its strategy in Iraq.

But one must be aware that last Sunday's elections establish sectarianism in Iraq. So many Iraqis entered the electoral process whether as candidates or voters on a sectarian and/or ethnic basis and motives. It is very dangerous and Iraqis should reject sectarianism.

Janabi: But according to many Iraqi voters who talked to reporters on election day, they did so because they wanted to end the state of chaos in their country and restore security and stability. Isn't that the case?

al-Duri: I do not agree with that concept, these elections are not designed to restore security and stability. The US administration has been desperate to legalise its occupation of Iraq, but it has failed so far. This mission has become an obsession for it; especially that the war on Iraq is still protested against by EU and Arab countries.

Therefore the US is trying to legitimise its existence in Iraq by bringing in an elected parliament and a government which are fully loyal to it [US], and as such it will be able to conclude long term agreements that secure its interests and influence in Iraq.

Janabi: As a politician and a professor of politics, do you think that the Iraqi Sunni Arabs boycotting of the elections could put the legitimacy of the process at risk?

al-Duri: It is wrong to say that Sunni Arabs boycotted the elections. It is an attempt to ridicule a national Iraqi position that opposes the division of the country, by labelling it as a sectarian position.

The US occupation has encouraged the virtual division of Iraq into three entities. The first one is in the north, it is ethnically motivated and works to separate itself and establish an independent state (Kurdistan).

The second in the south plans to split and establish a sectarian entity backed by Iran. The third is central Iraq which for some reason carries a national vision for the future of Iraq.

Obviously the US works hard to destroy this entity, which happens to be Sunni and exists in central Iraq. But as a matter of fact, the people of central Iraq are Arab Iraqi Muslims in addition to being Sunnis. This part of the country holds a sense of national identity that rejects the foreign occupation and separation bids.

Janabi: But boycotting elections would have delayed the formation of a national Iraqi government, parliament and constitution, don't you agree?

al-Duri: All that you are talking about was approved by the former US administrator in Iraq, Paul Bremer.

Janabi: And what is wrong with that if it would benefit the country?

al-Duri: A country's constitution must be national, while Iraq's interim constitution which laid the foundation for Iraq's future constitution was put forward by Noah Feldman, a Jewish American university professor.

All the documents that rule Iraq today were made in the US, translated to Arabic and forwarded to Iraqis who could not even discuss them properly. How can a country adopt a constitution imposed by a foreign power?

Even the elections were set by Feldman's document, and thus the elections have no legitimacy because it is based on illegal documents written by an occupying force.

Janabi: The interim Iraqi interior minister has said the US could pull out of Iraq in 18 months. What do you think of this statement?

al-Duri: Initially, I would like to ask why this statement came on the eve of the elections? It was obviously part of the election campaign.

However, this is part of the US' exit strategy. This notion is being widely discussed in the US, not because the US genuinely wants to pull out from Iraq, but because of unexpected urban fighting.

They are spending hundreds millions of dollars on Iraqi security forces in order to put them face to face with the resistance. Actually, this money is supposed to be for the reconstruction of Iraq, but I can assure you that nothing has been reconstructed, absolutely nothing, not even in the oil sector.

At the end of the day, Iraqi officials do not speak for themselves, they just echo the US' desires and instructions. The real ruler of today's Iraq is not the president of Iraq, nor the interim prime minister; actually it is the US embassy in Baghdad.

It is unlikely that the US would voluntarily withdraw from Iraq; it has spent nearly \$300 billion up to now, how is it going to get this money back if it withdraws? The US has captured a goose with golden eggs (Iraq), why would it let it go? That cannot be.

The US did not go to war with Iraq because of WMD, or links with al-Qaida. I am fully convinced that it has an agenda in my country. It also did not come to establish democracy in the country. On the contrary, if we look at what is in today's Iraq we will find nothing but division, hatred, and sectarianism.

If the US were to pull out, it will not do so unless it secures powerful bases in Iraq.

Janabi: US bases exist in Japan and Germany; I think no one can argue that US bases hindered the development of those two countries in the post-second world war era?

al-Duri: It is very strange that some Iraqis accept this idea. US bases in Germany and Japan were set up in different international conditions! It came after a world war involving Germany and Japan who waged an aggressive war and occupied foreign countries, and the US and its allies fought to drive out German forces from occupied Europe.

That was not the case with Iraq. There were no Iraqi forces out of Iraqi soil, and the war took place on its soil with forces which came from overseas to occupy it. How can we compare what has happened in Iraq with Nazi Germany?!

Janabi: Regardless, why don't anti-US Iraqis wait and see?

al-Duri: You have to choose either bread with dignity or bread without dignity. Why should

we wait? What does Iraq need from the US?

It is a country rich in resources, located in a strategic position, and with a highly educated people. If the US really wants to help, there are dozens of poor and undeveloped countries out there, let it help them instead of helping a country which possesses the world's second largest oil reserve and which has achieved high rates of development before it occupied it.

Janabi: When Baghdad fell to US forces on 9 April 2003, you said the "game is over". What did you mean by that?

al-Duri: Many people interpreted my words that what happened was a game between Saddam Hussein and the US; actually I meant that during the 13 years of UN sanctions on Iraq, the UN was acting like a theatre.

All players were not sincere in finding a way to end the sanctions that killed millions of Iraqis. The proof for that is when the US decided to attack Iraq, everyone backed off and the US did what it wanted.

Janabi: But there were protests around the world, and many countries did oppose the war.

al-Duri: That was not enough.

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