

Yazidis, The People of the Peacock Angel

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"The earth's trees have become tears of heaven's cheeks.... The flower that tempted the wind to carry its perfume, died yesterday." Ali Ahmad Said, Victims of a Map, Saqi Books *

When the Mongol hordes invaded what is now Iraq, Gengis Khan is: " ...said to have declared: 'all cities must be razed, so that the world may once again become a great steppe, in which Mongol mothers will suckle free and happy children.'" **

This was the twelfth century "war on terror" and it is not delusional to witness what has happened to Iraq since March 2003: the destruction of an entire civil society, history, records, education, health, life, to draw the parallels. "We fight them over there, so we don't have to fight them over here" is the Capitol Hill mantra, regarding a society with no weapons of mass destruction, unable even to board a 'plane from Iraq, during the thirteen year pre-invasion embargo. A people, the majority of which, just prayed their baby would be born whole and healthy and survive to adulthood, in a country where medicines, surgical equipment and therapeutic aids were vetoed by the US and UK – and where hyper-inflation was such that many families ate in rotation, one giving up food for a day, so the others would have a little more.

A thousand years before the Mongol invasion, the region had developed a "sophisticated civilisation" with "innovations in literature, science, art and civil engineering ... gardens, irrigation systems, libraries; ornate palaces flourished. With the Mongol onslaught, all were 'comprehensively looted', the region depopulated. Men, women and children were butchered, not alone by the Mongols, but by willing and unwilling collaborators they brought with them: '..whole cities lay in ruins.' Those not slaughtered fled a reign of terror, where culture and creativity had previously dominated." How history repeats.

The latest slaughter for whom the occupiers are responsible (as occupying forces, all be it illegally, the American and British forces are responsible for the safety of and provision of essential services to the population) is that of at least five hundred Yazidis, in the north west Sinjar region, on 14th August. Four truck bombs left three settlements "looking as if a nuclear explosion" had occurred. At least fifteen hundred are estimated to have been injured, according to Dr Said Hakki of the Iraqi Red Crescent – and history has again repeated itself.

Previous attacks against the Yazidis were under another ruthless invasion, that of the Ottomans, when they were subjected to twenty major massacres, between 1640 and 1910. "Liberated" Iraq, whose, health services, education and infrastructure, until the embargo, were the envy of the region and where safety was pretty well guaranteed – the absolute exception being if opposition politics were indulged in – has, at every level, been returned

by America and Britain's hordes, backwards to Mesopotamian history's darkest eras.

Washington's knee jerk reaction to the Yazidi bloodbath was, of course, to blame "Al Qaeda", then to state that: "Extremists continue to show to what lengths they will go to stop Iraq from becoming a stable and secure country." Then, of course, that they would "track down those responsible". Is there intelligent life anywhere by the Potomac? They were "suicide bombers". Thus dead.

It would be interesting, to know though, how the US army knew within minutes that "two tons of explosives" were involved.

Indisputable is that truck bombs, car bombs, suicide bombers, beheadings, kidnappings, the daily toll of bodies found bound and terribly tortured and dumped in the great biblical rivers, in streets, the Sunni-Shia "divide", all came in with the US-UK invasion and the murderous militias they brought with them.

Why the gentle, pastoral Yazidis? This ancient sect, whose beliefs are drawn from Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism and Mandeism, of whom there are believed to be only 750,000 worldwide, have their largest population in the Sinjar highlands in Iraq's northern Nineveh Province, a little west of Mosul and the remains of the equally ancient town Tel Afar, decimated, Falluja-like, in a pre "surge" "pacification".

This previously religiously and ethnically mixed region is a microcosm of pre-invasion Iraq, known for its welcome and peaceful co-existence. The prophet Jonah is believed buried in the great Mosque which overlooks Mosul, whilst Saint Matthew is believed buried in the Christian Monastery, on the top of Mount Maqloub, nearby. Both were places of pilgrimage and wonder, for Muslim and Christian alike.

The place of pilgrimage for Yazidis worldwide, in late August, is the shrine at Lalish, nearby, of Sheikh Adi (died 1162) believed to be the reincarnation of their deity Malak Ta'us: The Peacock Angel. "

The Yazidis have throughout history, been often wrongly interpreted as "Devil worshippers". Their belief in fact should be a lesson to all: no soul is beyond hope. Malak Ta'us WAS the Devil, who REPENTED. After he fell from grace, he filled seven urns of tears, over seven thousand years, tears that were used to extinguish the fires of hell; thus, this great grief in repentance, the Yazidis believe, erased the concept of hell, and embraced belief that all humanity is redeemable. Malak Ta'us became the Peacock Angel.

God is revered by Yazidis as the Creator of all and having achieved this wondrous task, is no longer an active force. He entrusted the world to seven angels, of whom the archangel was the redeemed Malak Ta'us.

Yazidis believe that good and evil both exist in the mind and spirit of human beings. It depends on the humans, themselves, as to which they choose. Thus, their devotion to Malek Ta'us is integral, since it was he who was given the same choice between good and evil by God, and ultimately, searingly, repented and chose the good.

Malek Ta'us has been described as: "a sort of fire wall between an imperfect world and the perfection of the Supreme Being". (Isya Joseph, Sacred Books and Traditions of the Yazidis, 1919.) Yazidis believe that periodically their seven holy beings are reincarnated in human

form, as Sheikh Adi, so love your neighbour; you never know who he may be.

Mohammed is regarded as a Prophet but Jesus Christ too, was an angel in human form. Yazidis are born into and marry within their sect and there is no converting, in or out. Other beliefs are that the first Yazidi was born of Adam alone and that there was a great flood, long before Noah and his ark. Yazidis, as Samaritans and/or Druze are “a little island of diversity in a world increasingly homogenised by globalisation”.

The annual August, six day pilgrimage is a joyous religious festival involving music, dancing, special dishes, decoration of eggs, bathing in the rivers below their villages and the hanging of hundreds of oil lamps around the tomb of Sheikh Adi and those of the other Saints – seven in all. Prayers are made twice a day, facing the sun. Earth, air, fire and water are so sacred that spitting on or in to them is taboo. Also taboo is the eating of pork, fish, cockerel, gazelle, cauliflower, lettuce, pumpkin and the wearing of blue, the latter possibly because the Peacock Angel is depicted in vibrant blue, so to wear his colours could be sacrilegious.

August, according to a report on the US Department of Defence website (27th July) was also the month, that, according to Colonel Stephen Twitty, US troops were planning to virtually hand over the administration of the region to the Iraqis, so relatively safe had it become. Twitty, Commander of the 1st Cavalry Division's 4th Brigade commended the “very mature provincial government”; the handover would be based on the “security situation”. Such a handover would also include the vast Kirkuk oil field, the region's abundant natural gas – and uranium deposits. US ceding of power now, is clearly out of the question. Further, when the British leave Basra, as they seem set to do, the American forces are set to move in to “protect supply routes”. Since there are nearly two hundred thousand private security personnel in Iraq who could do that, it has to be wondered whether it is to protect the Basra oil terminal and the other vast oilfield, Rumailah, for Uncle Sam (or Uncle George and his pals.) When the US army invaded, they named their forward operating bases after oil companies.

A question which arises, however, is how many “suicide bombings” are “false flag” operations? In Afghanistan, in ten years of war with the Soviet Union, they were unheard of, as in Iraq's previous invasion by the British. For anyone who cares to look, there are many reports of Iraqis being stopped at check points, being told to take documents to police or army station, coming out to find their vehicle driving differently and on investigation finding an explosive device in it. How many simply drove on ...?

A recent incident was recounted by an Iraqi, working with the US, who was sent on a mission. He could not find the address and when there was no signal on his phone, he left his car and crossed the street, hoping for better reception. As he stopped to dial, his car exploded. And here is the report of the Basra incident of September 2005: “Today in Basra, Southern Iraq, two members of the British SAS (Special Ops) were caught, ‘in flagrante’ as it were, dressed in full ‘Arab garb’, driving a car full of explosives and shooting and killing two official Iraqi policemen.” The British army demolished a police station in order to release them. Strange way of conducting the “war on terror” when the terrorists had been rightly arrested. And don't forget the destruction just over the border from Basra, in Iran, of which the Iranian government spokesman said: “This bomb had a British accent.”

Kayla Williams records her time as an “intelligence officer” in northern Iraq, with the US Army's 101st Airborne Division between 2003 and 2004 in the Yazidis region. She reports that the Yazidis were considered “devil worshippers” by local Muslims, but in spite of visiting

them, learned little of their religion; she thought it was ancient and concerned with angels. She described a temple as: "a small rock building with objects dangling from the ceiling", thus seemingly did not ask what they represented. No doubt she reported the locals' feelings back at the mess table at base.

Here's hoping they did not have the same kind of religious fervour as those who prayed before the decimation of Fallujah when told by their chaplain that the Devil lived there and they were going to find him. Between "Crusades", God and oil, strange things happen. The locals, of course, had coexisted with their neighbours since the Ottomans left. The Yazidi survivors from the attack were treated in their hospitals. Coincidentally in 1993 the New York Times headed an article on the Yazidis: "The Sect May be Dying, but Satan is still alive and well".

Meanwhile, the traumatised Yazidis are reported by doctors as removing their relatives from hospitals, so frightened are they that they will be even less safe in larger towns. Three hundred "badly broken" relatives were removed from Sinjar hospital, according to one doctor.

There will be no joyful pilgrimage celebrations this August. Whole families were wiped out in the attacks. One man, Abu Saeed, said he had lost fifty one members of his immediate and extended family. Ironically, during the 1915-1916 Ottoman (Turkish) massacre in Anatolia, of the mainly Christian Armenians, the Yazedis courageously sheltered many, risking and losing their lives in the Ottoman occupied Iraq. Now, they, like almost every Iraqi, feel they have no place to hide. Ironically under Saddam, as with all religions, they were donated money for restoration and refurbishment of their religious buildings, the government even donated for an entire new temple. It is the "New Iraq" which has brought terror to their doors.

Freya Stark (Baghdad Sketches, 1937) describes a region I found entirely unchanged: "...the valley (at festival time) filled all night with moving lights among the trees ... we walked down in the mountain solitude, peopled only with the sound of water and the voices of the birds .. we looked across to the hills of Bavian, mauve and blue .. and all over it lay sunlight, shining impartially on all temples of mankind."

An abiding memory of the Yazidis is standing on the flat roof of one of their temples, its great obelisk in the centre, reaching heavenward. "Look behind you, Madam", said the priest. I turned and just across the narrow sun dappled street, in the small hamlet, was a Catholic church, next to a mosque - and just visible round the corner, a synagogue. Could peaceful co-existence ever be more evocatively illustrated?

The last fifty three blood soaked months in Iraq are squarely the responsibility of the American and British forces and their dwindling allies, or is that responsibility something even more sinister?

Notes

*Victims of a Map
http://www.saqibooks.com/saqi/display.asp?K=9780863565243&sf=KEYWORD&sort=sort_title&st1=Victims+of+a+Map&x=14&y=8&m=3&dc=3

Ali Ahmed Said http://www.geocities.com/hhilmy_ma

** From Sumer to Saddam, Geoff Simons, Macmillan, 1994
<http://www.amazon.com/Iraq-Sumer-Saddam-Geoff-Simons/dp/1403917701>

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She was also senior researcher for John Pilger's award-winning documentary, "Paying the Price: Killing the Children of Iraq".

<http://www.johnpilger.com/page.asp?partID=4>

and author, with Nikki van der Gaag, of "Baghdad" in the "Great Cities" series, for World Almanac Books (2006.)
http://www.amazon.com/Baghdad-Great-Cities-World-Nikki/dp/0836850491/sr=1-5/qid=1171018142/ref=sr_1_5/105-9176229-7042804?ie=UTF8&s=books

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