

The Mythology of a Conqueror

Maxime Rodinson

The Gulf crisis? The threats of Saddam Hussein? The Western and other hostages? Two world views clash over these questions—two public opinions, each engaging masses of people, ardently take opposite sides, each with good arguments.

How is it possible for “Westerners” (in the broadest sense) not to evoke Hitler? Saddam remorselessly violates the most elementary rules of international law. He breaks his word repeatedly. His unscrupulous expansionism is a menace to all. Where will he be stopped if the world allows him this first conquest?

For the Arab masses, and for some other Muslims (above all one hears the silence of the rest of the Third World), he is a champion. He sounds the hour of revenge against the hated West, the affluent exploiter and oppressor. He makes the arrogant defenders of supremacy tremble: it's their turn to be humiliated, imprisoned, beaten or worse.

Many take exception, of course: Kurds and others who have suffered at the hands of the Iraqis; the masters of the underground treasure of Arabia; those governments ridiculed by Saddam; all those disquieted by this heavily armed rival. But the West should have no illusions. It is enthusiasm for this challenge which prevails, by a wide margin.

The reasons are many. The distribu-

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Governor of Dohok province, Iraq.

R. Maro



President Bush and advisors watch Iraqi television.

White House

tion of oil wealth in the countries which are central to Islam is truly scandalous. The countless princes of the Emirates and Saudi Arabia use their undeserved oil income to finance extravagant expenses, to live lives of senseless, insolent luxury, to support armies of valets and whores, to buy buildings and land in Paris, on the Côte d'Azur, in London or New York. They redistribute very little, while millions of their compatriots or coreligionists crouch in the most abject misery, famine and poverty.

International law has been violated, you say? But how can one not suspect this sudden indignation, this immediate and massive mobilization, while so many other flagrant violations have met only with complacency? In the Middle East, the example that comes to mind most often—and we shouldn't be surprised—is of Israel's unruffled disdain, over decades, for the resolutions of the United Nations. Never has there emerged anything other than condemnations which, as we all know, are absolutely inoperable from the moment they are formulated.

Behind all great upheavals one finds a prime mover. The masses, angered by injustice which stares them in the face, moved by legitimate resentment, rise up to avenge and redeem themselves. But they never translate their anger directly and automatically into action. There is always a group, an organization, which leads. In the case of a revolt motivated by nationalist indignation, this is often a state, at its head a monarch, a leader or a Führer. Nationalist movements forge their own ideology, which is, in large part at least, a myth. The idea of one state—one people has often been appropriated and exploited by states or leaders: Bismarck and Cavour rather than Lassalle and Garibaldi. Unity has been achieved. But has the result been really so beneficial for these people and for others?

In our case, what do we see? Will Iraq be, as millions of Arabs fervently hope, the Prussia and Piedmont where the Arab people will finally liberate and unify themselves, gathered (as many would have it) under the wise commandments of the Quran? Iraq, after all, does not fall into the company of resource-poor countries. It, too, has oil

and plenty of the arable land that Egypt, for example, so cruelly lacks. As for its supreme leader, suddenly sanctified as the object of Western rage, he has little claim as guarantor of a revolution of the dispossessed. His past initiatives leave one thinking that he has preoccupations other than redeeming the Third World. He often compares himself to his distant predecessor Nebuchadnezzar who, of course, destroyed the last pitiable vestige of the first Israelite states, but who also dominated a great part of the area of Syria/Iraq conquered by his predecessors.

Saddam is right. He is apparently more aware than his millions of newer partisans of the invariables of Middle East geopolitics that go beyond ideological movements. In the epoch of Nebuchadnezzar (around 600 B.C.) and before him, there was no question of Islam, not even for all practical purposes a question of Arabs. Yet the poles of power were the same as today: Egypt, Mesopotamia (that is to say, Iraq), and Iran.

Like his precursors of two or three millennia ago, Saddam has sought above all to extend his reach wherever he could. He has used all the ideologies at his disposal, one after the other, to legitimize his forays and mobilize his forces. Not so long ago, he boldly reinterpreted the history of Islam as an eternal struggle of Arabism against Iran. That gave us eight years of war and a million dead. The gullible would now have us believe that this poor man, weak and spineless, was carried to these extremes by nasty, rich emirs pursuing their own interests! This is the naiveté of militants.

One who presumes to be a conqueror must calculate well the strength of his adversaries. Saddam miscalculated the obstacles in Iran. Perhaps he has done so again. Time will tell. In any case, this is an instance of a struggle for total power, for the construction of a new Babylonian empire, not for a revolution to save the wretched of the earth. Recall that the empire of Nebuchadnezzar was quickly destroyed by the Iranian, Cyrus, who lay in wait at the gates. Other Iranians, who are taking advantage of the current situation without forgetting the past, are lying in wait now.

There is no end to history. The defeat of the US (and the UN)—if this is conceivable—will not be the dawn of a radiant new world. Humanity will not enter into a new era of liberty and happiness thanks to the triumph of a new chosen people—"an Arab nation endowed with an eternal mission," as the chief slogan of the Ba'th Party puts it—nor by the application of the elusive social precepts of Islam. Whatever the masses may imagine, quite understandably, thirsting as they are for victory over history, we're dealing here rather with the affirmation of a neo-Babylonian empire, at most reformulated to extend to an Iraqi-Arab arena. Why would this new/ancient empire, of its own accord, improve the fate of the disinherited of Botswana or Peru, or even of Bangladesh?

It is time to stop believing in Santa Claus. There is no miracle solution. The situation is highly dangerous. Do we break and humiliate the suffering masses by enforcing the unconditional surrender of a leader in whom they—even if wrongly—have invested their hope? Or do we begin, under the worst possible circumstances, to redistribute power and wealth by demolishing the barriers which stand against military conquest, barriers built with great difficulty by international law—even though international law has been quite pernicious in lowering these barriers before more privileged conquerors? Do we, above all, begin a war with unforeseeable consequences?

Thankfully, we are not dealing with monolithic blocs. Mediators are available, and the best of them will be those who have least warranted the suspicions of the people most concerned. They deserve a free voice, and a *carte blanche*. ■

—Translated by Priscilla Norris
and Joe Stork



Sawt al-Kuwait