

What do We Owe the Iraqis?

A Conversation with Andrew Bacevich

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MARCH 18, 2008

Q: Thank you so much for taking time to talk to me today. What do we Americans owe the Iraqis morally, legally and politically as a result of our 2003 military invasion?

A: The first thing that I would say is that the conduct of war is a function of the state, and the state's principal moral obligation is to its clients, the American people.

So the first moral issue with regard to the Iraqi war, it seems to me, is does the continuation of this war serve the interest of the American people? If it does, then I do think there's a moral obligation to continue the war. If it doesn't, then I believe there's a moral obligation on the part of our political authorities to terminate the war.

My own view is that the war was a mistake from the onset, that five years of war have done great harm to the interests of the American people, and therefore our leaders really have a moral obligation to bring this thing to a close. But the point there is that the principle moral obligation of our political leaders is to us, not to the rest of the world. The President swears an oath to support and defend the Constitution. He doesn't swear an oath to bring peace and harmony to the entire world.

Having said that, it's clear that five years of war have done enormous harm to the Iraqi people. This is measured principally by non-combatant casualties, people killed and wounded, measured by people displaced, either internally displaced within Iraq or displaced people who have become refugees, chiefly in Syria and in Jordan.

And so there is some moral obligation towards those people. Now frequently, when the question of moral obligation comes into the question, becomes part of the discussion of the war, it's used by those who wish to continue the war. In other words the argument is: now that we're there, we have a moral obligation to see things through. I don't see it that way. Again, I think the first question is: does being there serve the interests of the American people? But even to the extent that we have a moral obligation to the Iraqi people who have been harmed by our activities, then our obligation is to those people, not to Iraq as a nation-state.

And in that regard, it seems to me that if we're serious about discharging this moral obligation, we would do it not by continuing the war – which of course has been the cause, the source of the harm in the first place – but by actually redressing the harm that we have done. And one can do that in fairly practical ways. For example, something on the order of two and a half million Iraqis are now refugees, and they are living in camps. One would imagine that the camps are squalid and abysmal. If we have an obligation to those people, good, let's fund the running of the camps. Let's provide shelter for refugees. Let's provide food for refugees. Let's provide education for the children of the refugees. That would be a practical way, it seems to me, to address any moral obligation we have to those we have harmed.

But beyond that, let's allow them to come to the United States of America. Since we've screwed up their country, let's give them a chance to find opportunity here in conditions where they could enjoy relative peace and security and probably actually enjoy more opportunity than they have back in Iraq. So let's bring a couple million Iraqi refugees into the country.

Or, on the assumption that some day this war is going to end, let's begin setting aside the funds that would rebuild Iraq. We're spending probably something on the order of about \$150 billion a year to fund the war. Why don't we just earmark three or four years worth of war spending about half a trillion dollars. That would be a practical way to repair.

Now, you're smiling as I say this, because you know and I know that there's no way in hell that we're going to pay for the refugee camps. There's no way in hell that we're going to allow two or two and a half million Iraqi refugees into this country. And there's no way in hell that we're going to allocate half a trillion dollars to rebuild the country that we have helped to devastate.

And I think that really gets to the point that – and I say this with sadness – all the talk about acquitting a moral obligation to the Iraqi people really boils down to just talk. As a practical matter, there is zero interest in our political leadership, and minimal interest in the country at large in actually doing anything about this. Although in a sense that's not surprising because my own sense is that in politics, and especially in international politics, moral considerations seldom have more than a marginal significance in the calculations of policy.

- Q: In asking the question, “what do we owe the Iraqis?” the assumption is that “we” means all Americans. Yet, as you noted in your own work, it's really the military, rather than the American people as a whole, that almost exclusively has borne the weight of this war on Iraq. How do you think that can be corrected, and how can civilians share the burdens of our responsibility in Iraq?
- A: Through political engagement. It's sort of futile these days to be a dissenter, but it is at least a morally defensible stance to oppose the war, to stand against it, to speak against the war, if indeed one thinks that it's immoral and wrong – wrong for

us, wrong for them. People could have an honest disagreement on that, but that would be my view. And to the extent that, as individuals, we feel some sense of individual obligation to the harm that's done, there are ways to contribute money to different groups and organizations that actually in some small way. Again, it's all small because we act as individuals, but it can in a small way help to alleviate that.

I don't want to say just that everybody's so cynical and conniving, but the argument that the United States government ought to somehow shoulder the burden of acquitting this moral obligation, in some sense this is a way of saying that therefore I as an individual don't have to concern myself with it. Perhaps shame is the proper response to the U.S. government's failure to allow substantial numbers of Iraqi refugees into the country. But saying that the government should be shamed can be a way in which as an individual I wash my hands of any personal responsibility.

And each of us, as an individual, can only do so much. As individuals we actually can do very little, but if one takes this notion of a moral obligation stemming from the war seriously, then one ought to act within one's capacity to do so.

Q: Moving from the individual to more a more state-centered view, you wrote in an article that the United States long ago suspended its efforts to democratize Iraq and that to talk about an Iraqi government or state is a sleight of hand at this point. So what type of government do you think is possible in Iraq, and how much responsibility does the U.S. have in setting up and maintaining that government, if any?

A: That's obviously a big question, and a difficult question, but even to ask the question is to assume that the makings of a legitimate functioning Iraqi nation-state exists. I'm not sure that assumption is valid. Iraq was an invention of the British, after World War I. The British invented Iraq to suit the needs of Britain. Since the Brits faded from the scene to the extent that there's been in Iraqi nation-state, it's been a nation-state held together by a brutal dictatorship.

So whether or not they're really the makings of a nation, whether the people who are Sunnis and Shiites and Kurds and whoever, whether they really think of themselves in the first instance as Iraqis, I think very much remains to be seen. And the point of all that is to say that if the makings of an Iraqi nation-state really don't exist, then there's nothing we can do to bring that nation-state into existence. And the whole thing becomes kind of a fool's errand.

If the makings of an Iraqi nation-state do exist, if there's some potential for this country to function, to have some semblance of unity, to create political institutions that command some modicum of legitimacy, I actually don't think there's much we can do to bring those institutions into existence. I think that it's the work of the Iraqis. At best we can provide a little encouragement around the margins.

This phrase, “nation building,” which is come back into fairly common usage since the Iraq war began, assumes that outsiders can build a nation. I think that’s a pretty suspect proposition. We have, I think, wildly misread the experience that we had post-1945 in Germany and in Japan. Those tend to be kind of the classic cases that are cited to demonstrate that the United States can build nations, can imprint democracy. First off, I think that we probably actually had less to do with it than we credit ourselves with, but to the extent that Germany and Japan enjoy democracy today, much of the credit goes to Germans and Japanese, not to the American occupiers.

Q: And those states already existed before the war began.

A: Right. With a history, with a culture, with a sense of nationhood it seems to me, that exists marginally at best in the Middle East, and specifically Iraq. So I don’t think there’s a lot we can do. To me, one of the things that this whole war has put so vividly on display is how limited our power is, how limited our insights are, how limited our ability to actually understand the complexities of a problem in that kind of a place, which is, in many respects, alien to us culturally, religiously and historically. I don’t mean alien as in bad – alien as in simply unfamiliar and difficult for us to grasp. And therefore, one should have very modest expectations about what one can accomplish in a place like that. This is why you don’t invade it in the first place.

Q: But we did invade, and subsequently helped the Iraqis draft a new constitution, hold elections and install a new government. Have our original obligations as an occupying force somehow changed because of our deep involvement in Iraqi domestic politics?

A: No I don’t think so. I don’t think we have any moral obligation to the Iraqi government. It’s true we that served as the midwife in creating this entity. But the Iraqi government is going to succeed or fail based on the efforts of the people who happen to be members of parts of this system. I think where we have acquired a moral obligation that has changed over time is with respect to the people who are harmed by the war. I don’t think we owe anything to Prime Minister al-Maliki. We just owe something to those who’ve been displaced and who’ve been harmed and who’ve lost family members, who’ve been injured, who’ve been killed. It’s a human thing, not a political thing.

Q: But surely without a political thing in place, it’s difficult to address the human thing too.

A: Well, see, that’s where I disagree with you. I may be putting words in your mouth, but it seems to me that’s the essence of the argument made by those who say that we have a moral obligation to continue the war: since we’ve created a semblance of a government, we now have an obligation to see things through until there is a fully established government. I don’t buy that. I think the moral obligation is to human

beings who've been harmed. And again, the people who want to argue that we have a moral obligation to continue the war—to put it bluntly, they are people who for the most part are arguing that we should continue to send somebody else's son and daughter to go fight this war. They're not saying, well, we have a moral obligation to continue the war so I'm going to go down to the local Army recruiter and sign up. It is somebody else's kid who's getting sent over there. It costs them nothing. It doesn't even cost them any tax dollars, because the war basically is being funded through borrowing.

So I would be rather insistent to the individual who says we have a moral obligation to say, well good, you go do your share. You get out your checkbook. You send your kid over there if the moral obligation is such a serious one. And of course, again, most of them are going to say, "Oh gosh, me? I've got bills to pay. Not my kid—my kid's got to go to Boston College and get an education so he can go be a lawyer." Which is fine, but then don't bother me about your conscience that you're so disturbed about this moral obligation.

Q: Just one last question. The Bush Administration has consistently tried to link the "war on terror" to the invasion and ongoing military operations in Iraq. How much truth do you think there is in these assertions?

A: Everybody except Vice President Cheney now accepts that Saddam Hussein had zero involvement in 9/11, minimal contact with al-Qaeda and in that sense the invasion of Iraq has nothing to do with the global war on terror. In another sense it does, and that's the sense in which the strategy concocted by the Bush Administration after 9/11, to prevent an recurrence of 9/11, was based on this wild notion that the exercise of American military power could bring about a political transformation of the Middle East such that those nations, that culture, would no longer breed violent radicals willing to undertake terrorist actions against the United States. And Iraq was supposed to be the test case, the first step, the transformation of Iraq into what Paul Wolfowitz called "the first Arab democracy" was then going to pave the way for the second Arab democracy and third Arab democracy and other Islamic democracies.

It hasn't worked. Now there are some people who say, well it hasn't worked because of tactical decisions, mistakes being made along the way. That's an argument, although I don't think it's a very good argument. I think the better argument is that it hasn't worked because it *won't* work. No amount of American power expended is going to bring about the democratization of the Islamic world. And, indeed, we don't even possess enough power even to undertake that seriously, beyond the case of Iraq itself. We've already reached the limits of our power.

So in that sense, the Iraq War is part of the global war on terror, and the Iraq War demonstrates that the strategy devised to prosecute the global war on terror has failed. It's bankrupt.

Q: Well thank you very much for your time.