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European Languages

زبانهای اروپائی

APRIL 16, 2018

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17.04.2018

Iraq Then, Syria Now



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When will you get the message? Comply, as Jordan, Egypt and others did and we'll protect your leaders, ensure favorable press, shore up your economy, secure energy needs, and engage your businessmen. In short: abide by our imperial diktat.

Alternative advice to a marginal (but an ambitious) nation determined to follow an independent course might be: build a solid self-sufficient economy; lure home your best expatriate talent in IT, engineering, medical research and media. Having done this, you may survive if: if you keep your head down, if you don't ally yourself with another strong

power, if you abandon all regional ambitions, and if your people don't try to excel? Above all, never do anything nasty "to your own people" allowing human rights specialists to declare at the appropriate moment, your "threat to humankind".

Whichever is the best strategy for survival, neither Syria nor Iraq found a way to avoid the wrath of the American-Israeli-British bloc.

We could make lists of 'did' and 'didn't do', one for Syria and one for Iraq, to compare their compliance. In any event, they'll both earn "F". So they have to be starved, humiliated, desiccated and demonized. Then, when this doesn't produce a sufficiently convincing "F-minus", they're bombed, and bombed again.

It's Syria's turn. The only reason I can imagine how Syrians feel today—those citizens who are somehow managing to survive within its borders— is because I was in Iraq in February 2003, in the days preceding the US invasion there. Women and men and children and soldiers and medics and teachers and diplomats and journalists—everyone—mutely awaited the blows. Finding themselves at that threshold stunned the whole population. Why? Why: because Iraq had begun to get back on its feet after a decade of brutal embargo and exclusion. The cost to the nation had been huge. But (by 2000) Iraq managed to lessen its diplomatic isolation; it even expected the United Nations might lift the US-imposed sanctions. Citizens commenced determinedly to rebuild. They could glimpse the end of the tunnel.

We know what happened next. And we know how that invasion was fabricated on phony evidence to "finish the job" (an idiom common to cowboys and gangsters).

Now to Syria fourteen years on. As recently as December 2017, ISIS was in retreat and citizens began to return to areas liberated by an exhausted but still viable Syrian army. Territories occupied by ISIS and other rebels were retaken by Syrian troops. Some inter-city roads reopened, heating oil was available, food prices seemed lower, and a few foreign groups dared to visit the capital. Gasps of hope emanating from the besieged people were palpable.

In the case of Iraq, by 2002, it started to rebound after a decade of decline due to the embargo. The entire nation had been fractured and impoverished; bodies and nerves were battered by pollution, disease and scarcity of medicines—all precipitated by the blockade. Iraq lost millions of its young; its wheat fields had been destroyed, first untreated by pesticides, then firebombed by foreign aircraft; its diplomatic energy was exhausted, and its Kurds had secured a protected territory which forecast the nation's possible breakup. Iraq had an army but no air force, its planes in disrepair, its pilots gone. The nation's oil

revenues, controlled from outside, were of little use in addressing its massive civilian needs.

Starting in 1998, with astonishing fortitude, Iraq had begun to erode the blockade, extracting itself from that deadly vortex. Baghdad hosted an international trade fair. Building cranes reappeared on the city's skyline; regional airlines began regular flights into Baghdad airport.

Just when Iraqis felt they might actually beat back the embargo, they were confronted by another war—a blanket military assault. And no one doubted how defenseless Iraq was.

Worldwide, acknowledging the inevitability of an invasion on Iraq, a few million people roused themselves in protest. That day, February 15, 2003, I was in Mosul in north Iraq and I witnessed firsthand the public's bleak mood. Those far off demonstrations, instead of offering hope, only confirmed to Iraqis the veracity of the military plan against them. (Who cares what those panicky demonstrators shout; they are 13 years' late.) That dissent, they muttered, was disingenuous, driven only by Americans' fears for their own fighters.

Now, Syria. In 2010, more restrictions were added to earlier sanctions that had already marginalized Syria globally and impeded its economic development. Wikileaks's [published diplomatic documents](#), reveal that by 2006, Washington had a stated objective to overthrow the Syrian government. The uprisings in North Africa (the so-called Arab Spring) may have provided an impetus for the burst of public dissent in Syria. After a merciless crackdown by security forces, civil unrest spread until the country devolved into a sectarian war that spread more quickly than was experienced by Iraq. Syria's once robust and proudly self-sufficient economy began to collapse; youths and professionals left, emptying its universities and hospitals of staff and students.

Foreign observers surmised Syria would fall within six months, that Al-Assad could not withstand the forces mobilized against his government. They didn't know Syria.

With Russian support, but drawing on its willfulness and military power, Syria surprised everyone. Although the toll on its troops has been high, Syrian forces recaptured land lost to its foes. It kept major roads open, and secured unfailing support from Russia, Iran and Lebanon.

Losses to the nation are immense, the staggering civilian toll graphically recorded day after day. Although terribly crippled, the country managed to regain territory and defeat ISIS on several fronts—successes lamented by the western press. Syria's defeat of ISIS notwithstanding, American generals declare that they will remain in Syria “until ISIS is defeated”, then announce that additional fighters will be sent to the country.

After the US president muttered something about disengaging from Syria, the press challenged him to demonstrate resolve, to show real leadership, how the job was left unfinished. Saturday, the bombing began, silently applauded by Israel, and bolstered by the UK and France.