

DANGEROUS MANOEUVRES IN THE DARK



The abrupt withdrawal of 14,000 Syrian troops from the Lebanon fills me with mixed emotions. Press headlines celebrating the end of an era of foreign military occupation sit uneasily against daily efforts to justify the 150,000 US troops in current occupation of Iraq.

Syria's withdrawal, at the behest of the US and Israel, raises awkward issues that I want to explore, but I need to stay with the Iraq comparison for a bit before doing so.

I have been to Lebanon and know the desires people harboured about being more independent of policy decisions made in Damascus. Nevertheless, the involvement of Syria was seen as a stabilising influence in the aftermath of the carnage that attempted to tear the Lebanon apart. The recent public demonstrations calling for Syrian troop withdrawals would not even have been allowed in Iraq. The

Syrians have not bombed cities, cut off water supplies, sold off Lebanese assets or left hospitals without basic medical supplies.

Messages we have been getting from trade union leaders in Iraq, from doctors in their hospitals and from journalists who are not part of the military press corps, paint a picture in which Iraqi citizens live in far greater daily fear of the US occupying army than Lebanese citizens ever did of the Syrians.

How easily we slip into caricature that defend or denounce military occupation as it suits. Those who call for troop withdrawals in Beirut are 'champions of democracy'. Those who do so in Baghdad are terrorists and subversives. The brutalising but pro-American tyranny of Uzbekistan is cast as an ally. The closed theocracy of Iran becomes a threat. The objective internal conditions in a country end up being immaterial. What matters is whose side you are on.

The memories of my visit to Lebanon some years ago still have sharp edges to them. Beirut was pock-marked with bullet wounds of the war that had ravaged its streets. When MPs wanted to wander around the city centre, we were unprepared for armed guards insisting on forcing shoppers to line up against the wall whilst we browsed around the counters. Needless to say, we abandoned the exercise.

What we did do, though, was talk to people about military occupation. The most pressing issue they raised was the de facto occupation of south Lebanon by Israeli backed fighters. This was supported by Israeli air strikes that made it impossible for the Lebanese government to take us safely into the south to see conditions there. We did, though, meet groups who took us through what the end of the occupation would mean for them.

The Lebanese agenda included the return of land occupied or controlled by Israel since the 1967 war; the ending of Israeli sequestration of water from Lebanese aquifers; and a resolution of the rights of Palestinian refugees that Lebanon had sheltered throughout the second half of the 20th century. Sadly, none of these figure in today's 'democracy' agenda being celebrated by the Bush administration and its

partners.

The Lebanon will be judged more by whether it addresses Israeli security needs rather than its own. Getting tough on Hezbollah will be given a much higher profile than the return of water rights or the right of return for Palestinians. In the worst circumstances, Syria 's withdrawal could re-kindle the conflict between Lebanese Muslims and Christians, with the Palestinians again caught in the middle. Already, we hear politicians making crowing claims about democratic gains from the promiscuous militarism of US/UK interventionism across the Middle East and Eastern Europe . Such claims skip over the inconvenient, the damaging or the oppressive.

The heroin democracy of Afghanistan is listed as a success, when the elected government can not set foot outside Kabul and where warlords rule the roost everywhere else. This is not a nostalgic plea for the return of those fun loving guy s in the Taliban. It may, though, at least seek a reference point for the period when Afghanistan had universal education provision and equal employment rights for men and women. The trouble, of course, was it had a communist government that Reagan and Thatcher were determined to overthrow by funding the Mujahadin.

So too, with the patchwork of 'progress' that is the former Yugoslavia . We hear little of democratic gains amongst new minority communities in the fragmentary states that now remain. What we do know is that the 'democratic' legacy in both Bosnia and Kosovo is of constitutions written by Western occupying armies; constitutions that enshrine the rights of capital rather than of citizens. The privatisation of public assets is at the heart of everything the US administration has touched across the region. Where there are exceptions they are to be found in pre-existing, closed societies; where unelected leaders happily do deals with unaccountable executives of the same global corporations taking ownership of lands elsewhere 'liberated' by war.

Before we celebrate such changes, as the model for 21 st century democracy, we need a harder look at gains for citizens rather than for corporations. Swapping one elite for another, one system of exploitation for a different one, may not be the benchmark for progress the world is looking for.