Fear and Celebration in Baghdad

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I wonder if it feels strange for Iraqis to make New Year’s resolutions with the looming threat of American bombings and the future so uncertain? I’m in Baghdad for the holiday season as a member of the Iraq Peace Team, a group of Americans working to push back the Bush administration from pushing for an unnecessary and dangerous war.

We spend our time meeting ordinary Iraqi citizens, listening to their stories and reeling those stories back to the American people. The mainstream journalists in Baghdad rarely speak to ordinary Iraqis. They are mostly cooped-up in the Al Rasheid, the fanciest hotel in town, and spend their days rushing between press briefings and chasing the weapons inspectors.

In contrast, as Iraq Peace Team members, we spend our days visiting schools, hospitals and churches, or just sitting and chatting with Iraqi friends in the many restaurants and cafes near our hotel. “We don’t even want to think about war, we don’t talk about it,” a graduate student at Baghdad University told me. “My husband works hard to pay our bills and I’m working on my thesis. Our children don’t know about the threat of war—we are focused on our studies.”

Despite suffering under 12 years of crippling UN sanctions, the citizens of Baghdad still know how to celebrate. I attended my share of Christmas parties here, and we’re all looking forward to New Year’s Eve festivities. People are celebrating and conditions are slowly improving, but sadly many Iraqis depend on food rations from the oil-for-food program and many are still underfed and malnourished. The rations only provide 2,150 calories per person per day and lack sufficient high-nutrient fruits and vegetables. Likewise, hospitals and health care facilities still have a severe shortage of medicines and supplies.

Another U.S. bombing campaign would turn this long-standing humanitarian crisis into a disaster - genocide.

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“It’s frightening to think that some of my congregants could be killed if the US attacks,” said Father Vincent, the resident priest. Iraq’s one million Christians (4% of the population) freely worship at churches throughout the country. Church spires rise from the Baghdad skyline among the minarets of the many beautiful Mosques. “A U.S. attack could disrupt the balance of respect and tolerance between religions here. It could be very dangerous for Iraqi Christians,” Father Vincent told me.

Would a U.S.-led war against Iraq make the world a safer place? Just the opposite - a U.S. invasion would not only destabilize Iraq, but would almost certainly increase terrorist threats against the United States. During my travels in the Middle East I have not met a single person who supports a war against Iraq. Some Arab leaders may indirectly support such a war, but terrorists come from the public at large. The point is, current U.S. foreign policy is not working.

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