

The vast majority of Iraqis supported the coalition forces in their liberation of Iraq, insists Georges Sada, head of the International Centre for Reconciliation in Iraq.

This surprising declaration is in stark and refreshing contrast to the protests taking place against George Bush in London and the media reporting of the unpopularity of American and British troops in Iraqi civil society.

Sada, a former Air Vice Marshall in Saddam Hussein's army, has been visiting Britain to receive the Coventry International Peace Prize. The prize awarded by the Cathedral's International Centre for Reconciliation, and sponsored by Sir Richard Branson, has two recipients this year – Ayatollah Alsadr and Georges Sada. The two men have worked closely together from their different perspectives for several years in their hope that the brutal regime of Saddam Hussein will one day be replaced by a secular democracy. Ayatollah Alsadr is the main Shia muslim leader in Iraq and has lived under acute repression from the Saddam regime for 35 years, but is now one of the leading proponents for peace who opposes the formation of an Islamic state and is working for the establishment of a secular democracy where respect for religion is guaranteed.

Sada, head of the International Centre for Reconciliation in Iraq, was 'retired' from the Army in 1991. In the first gulf war he had responsibility for prisoners of war but disobeyed direct orders from Saddam's younger son Qusay, to execute Kuwaiti, British and American prisoners. He was thrown into prison later and is thankful to this day that his own life was not taken.

He is critical of the coalition forces for keeping both the eastern and western borders of Iraq open for too long enabling extremist elements from Iran, and Al-Quaeda units into the country to conduct the current guerrilla-type campaign against British and American soldiers and many Iraqi interests.

As for Saddam Hussein who is active in leading the armed resistance, he is confident that the former dictator will eventually be brought to book. "It is not easy for the Americans because the country belongs to Saddam Hussein and he is now very active from hiding." The resistance is being mounted by those who have lost control of power, he says, citing Ba'ath loyalists, Al Qaeda and others who have found Iraq to be a convenient battlefield to fight coalition forces. He suspects that the Americans are similarly happier to engage with terrorists in the desert of Iraq rather than in the well-defended mountains of Afghanistan and its borders.

But the civil population, he says, are still suffering because of this lack of security. But he underscores the contrasts between before the invasion and after. "About 85 per cent of the people welcomed the forces and were happy to get rid of the evil regime of Saddam."

As to the opposition in the west, highlighted by the protests against the State visit of President George Bush, he argues that these people don't understand what was happening in Iraq. He believes that another agenda is fuelling the anti-war protests.

And he welcomes the presence of coalition forces until the peace is won – however long that takes. It would be a disaster, he says, if the coalition left when they still didn't have control of the country. He strongly believes that they should be rebuilding the Iraqi army to deal with the security threat.

“The US and British have great armies, but they are foreigners and not familiar with the people and the geography.”

Christians, he says are no more anxious for their future now, than any other segment of the population. “No-one knows what is going to happen tomorrow.” But he argues that a long history of cooperation between Christian and Muslim leaders, represented by his own friendship with Ayatollah Alsadr and other sunna muslim leaders , signals hope for the future.