Blueprint for a US colonial regime in Baghdad

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As US troops pour into the Middle East for an imminent invasion of Iraq, Washington's preparations for setting up a colonial-style regime in Baghdad have reached an equally advanced stage. The plans themselves are secret, but progress reports have been periodically leaked to the American media, partly because of sharp feuding within the Bush administration.

A detailed account appeared in the *Washington Post* last Friday. While Bush has yet to give his final approval, "blueprints for Iraq's future" have been drawn up which "outline a broad and protracted American role in managing the reconstruction of the country". As the article indicated, behind the façade of a civilian government, Washington is preparing for a lengthy US military occupation.

"The [Bush] administration's plans, which are nearing completion, envision installing a civilian administration within months of a change of government, US officials said. But the officials said that even under the best of circumstances, US forces likely would remain at full strength in Iraq for months after a war ended, with a continued role for thousands of US troops there for years to come," the newspaper explained.

Central to the colonial blueprint is firm control over Iraq's oil, which will be used to fund the occupation: In turn that requires the suppression of any attempts at secession by the Shiite majority in the south and the Kurdish minority in the north, where many of the oil fields lie. US officials have already assured Turkish authorities, concerned at the prospect of a Kurdish uprising, that American troops will be stationed in the key northern cities of Mosul and Kirkuk in the event of war.

The *Washington Post* commented: "Among key roles for US forces would be the preservation of Iraq's borders against any sudden claims by neighbours and the defence of the country's oil fields. Oil revenue is considered the primary source of funds for Iraq's reconstruction, and the proceeds of the oil trade are seen as the glue most likely to hold the country's communities together."

One element of the plan—the appointment of an international civilian administrator, possibly through the aegis of the UN—marks a shift in recent months. Previously, the US administration had touted the idea that one of its generals would run the Iraqi state along the lines of the American post-war occupation of Japan and Germany. But as opposition to the war has grown in the US and internationally, Washington has felt the need to try to disguise its intentions.

An article in the *New York Times* on January 6 reported that official Arab reaction to plans for an American military administration was unfavourable: "[T]he Arabs wanted no American Caesar in Iraq, no symbol of a colonial governor." Alluding to General MacArthur's role in post-war Japan, a senior US official told the newspaper: "The last thing we need is someone walking around with a corncob pipe, telling Iraqis how to form a government."

However the Bush administration, with or without UN assistance, attempts to dress up its plans, the charade is a thin one. While US officials self-righteously claim that the aim of the occupation will be to "democratise Iraq," the Iraqi people will have absolutely no say in the running of the country. Any, even nominal, popular vote has been relegated to the distant future.

Washington intends to leave largely intact the repressive government apparatus through which Saddam Hussein has exercised his autocratic rule. The CIA has drawn up a list of top civilian and military officials who will be hunted down for prosecution. But, according to the *New York Times*, a relatively small number of key senior officials will be removed. Likewise, the only institutions to be eliminated will be those closely identified with Hussein, such as the so-called revolutionary courts or the special security organisation.

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Much of the debate within the Bush administration has focussed on the role of the Iraqi exile opposition groups, which have been carefully nurtured with US money for more than a decade. Rightwing ideologues such as US Defence Policy Board chairman Richard Perle and Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld had advocated the establishment of a "democratic" Iraqi government, along the lines of Afghanistan, with a loyal American flunkey, such as the Iraqi National Congress (INC) chairman, Ahmad Chalabi, as nominal head.

The CIA and State Department opposed the proposal on tactical grounds, pointing out that Chalabi and other INC figures have no significant support inside Iraq. Some of the ex-generals vying for a role in a post-Hussein regime are accused of carrying out wartime atrocities. Moreover, those opposition groups with support inside Iraq—two Kurdish parties and the Shiite-based Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)—may, against Washington's wishes, push their separatist and communal demands.

The issue was decided in favour of the CIA and State Department at a gathering of opposition groups in London last month. US officials circulated a memo to opposition leaders prior to the conference opposing the formation of a government-in-exile—a move that would complicate plans for direct US rule. As a report in the *New York Times* put it, American officials, including US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, were "on hand to monitor the conference, cajoling its leaders in private to meet the goals set by Washington, while ensuring that they did not overstep the American-drawn boundaries."

The conference was dominated by haggling between rival groups over positions on a joint guiding committee, which had to be expanded to 65 members to accommodate all the various ambitions. It concluded with a call for "a democratic, federal, parliamentary government" and an appeal for the US to allow Iraqis to take immediate control of the country after the fall of Hussein. But as the *New York Times* reported, the declaration was largely to provide the Iraqi groups with some political cover, as "none of the opposition groups wants to be seen as an American patsy".

The conference also proposed holding a further meeting in the northern Iraqi city of Salahuddin on January 15. Northern Iraq has been virtually autonomous since the US and Britain unilaterally declared it a "no-fly zone" in April 1991. INC chairman Chalabi declared that the meeting was "crucial because it is taking place within Iraq" and would send "a strong message to [Hussein] that liberation is coming". But the gathering was postponed after the US announced that it could not guarantee the security of the delegates.

Last Friday's *Washington Post* article noted that the Iraqi exile groups have been sidelined. "Iraqis relegated to advisory roles in the immediate postwar period would gradually be given a greater role, but they would not regain control of their country for a year or more, according to current US thinking," it stated.

However, the opposition groups continue to pin their ambitions on a US military ouster of Hussein. Last week hundreds of exiles began reporting to military bases in the US and Europe for screening. Those chosen will be flown to Hungary, where they will receive rudimentary training to enable them to act as auxiliaries to US troops inside Iraq.

The INC, which supplied most of the names, hopes that the 3,000 trainees might form the nucleus of a new Iraqi army. But the role assigned to the Iraqi exiles is a secondary one—to act as translators, guides, police and to liaise between US combat troops and the Iraqi population.

Some opposition groups have ruled out any involvement. A SCIRI spokesman in London director, Hamid Bayati, declared: "We will be seen as being part of the invasion, of being with the Americans. In general, we are already suffering in Iraq from a media campaign representing us as puppets of the Americans."

The preparations for a post-Hussein administration are yet to be finalised and depend on a variety of contingencies. If any of the intrigues currently underway to either force Hussein into exile or foment an internal coup succeed, the Bush administration may have to include military or civilian figures inside Iraq in its plans. But whatever the variants, the central thrust of the blueprint will remain: to establish US military and political hegemony over Iraq and its supplies of oil.

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