

# Washington's colonial regime in waiting for Baghdad

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As the brutal US-led invasion of Iraq continues into its third week, a team of hundreds of mainly US officials is ensconced in luxury beachside villas, just south of Kuwait city, preparing to take the reins of power in Baghdad. The exact composition of the “interim Iraqi authority” and timing of its announcement are the subject of bitter feuding in the Bush administration. But there is no doubt as to its political character—it will be a neo-colonial regime implementing the dictates of Washington.

The Bush administration is pressing ahead with its plans for the new authority with scant regard for the opinions of its closest military allies—Britain and Australia—let alone those of other governments. Following the invasion of Afghanistan, the US was careful to obtain the official blessing of the United Nations for the installation of its puppet Hamid Karzai and his administration in Kabul. In the case of Iraq, Washington has made clear that any role for the UN will be on American terms.

According to a report to the *Washington Post* on April 2, the regime in waiting in Kuwait is “almost exclusively Americans”—former or current officials from the Pentagon, State Department and other agencies including Treasury, USAID and the Army Corps of Engineers. It includes “a handful of British and Australian diplomats, and a small group of Iraqi exiles” and the UN is expected to “play some part in the equation”.

The group is headed by retired three-star general Jay Garner, who runs the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Affairs (ORHA) set up by Pentagon in January. The team functions as an adjunct of the invasion force and Garner is directly answerable to the head of US Central Command General Tommy Franks, who is in charge of military operations. The extreme rightwing officials who run the Pentagon—neo-conservatives like Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle, until recently head of the Defence Policy Board—have played a major role in selecting personnel.

Garner has close relations with the so-called “neo-cons” and shares their views—in particular their support for the rightwing Likud regime in Israel. He travelled to Israel in 1998 under the auspices of a pro-Israel lobby group—the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs (JINSA)—which specialises in organising such trips for retired US military officers to meet Israeli politicians and officials.

In 2000, Garner put his name to a JINSA-sponsored statement declaring that Israel had exercised “remarkable restraint” in the face of violence “orchestrated by the Palestinian Authority”. “A strong Israel is an asset that American military planners and political leaders can rely on,” it stated. Present and former members of the JINSA advisory board include Vice President Richard Cheney, Perle and

Undersecretary of Defence Douglas Feith, who is also playing a prominent role in organising the interim Iraqi authority.

Former CIA director James Woolsey is currently a JINSA adviser as well as figuring prominently in other extreme rightwing Republican lobby groups such as the Committee for the Liberation of Iraq, established last November to press for military action. Woolsey has been touted to head the Ministry of Information in Baghdad. Although the proposal may be overruled as being too transparent an assertion of American power, he is being considered for other positions.

Other figures include Michael Mobbs, who is closely aligned with Perle and worked in the same law firm as Defence Undersecretary Feith. Mobbs is notorious as the Pentagon lawyer who argued the case for stripping prisoners of war seized in Afghanistan of all their democratic rights and detaining them indefinitely at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba. He is being mooted to take overall charge of the Iraqi civilian administration.

Diplomat Barbara Bodine and two retired generals, Buck Walters and Bruce Moore, have been selected to run three administrative regions—based on Baghdad, Basra and the northern Iraqi city of Mosul respectively. Robert Reilly, former head of the Voice of America, is collaborating with Iraqi exiles in developing propaganda broadcasts. Several experts from the US Treasury are discussing how best to replace the Iraqi currency, temporarily, with the US dollar.

Washington's ambitions in Baghdad are quite blatant. The *Washington Post* reported on April 3 a plan to install a senior American oil executive to oversee Iraq's oil industry. “Iraqi experts now outside the country would be recruited to handle future oil sales. Industry sources said former Shell Oil Co chief executive Philip J. Carroll is the leading candidate to direct production.”

American corporations are eagerly anticipating lucrative opportunities, not only in the oil industry but also in reconstruction contracts and other aspects of the Iraqi economy. A recent article in *Fortune* magazine offered fulsome praise for Garner's business credentials. The former general has close connections with the US defence industry. He was president of SY Coleman, a defence contractor involved with the deployment of Patriot missiles and which helped Israel develop its own Arrow missile system.

*Fortune* approvingly cited the remarks of Ariel Cohen from the conservative thinktank, the American Heritage Foundation. It will take someone with serious business know-how, Cohen declared, “to introduce a capitalist system where there's been central-control socialism since the 1960s”. Cohen, a right-wing ideologue who regards any state-run enterprise or restriction on private profit as “socialism,” is among those pushing for wholesale privatisation in Iraq, to clear the way for US corporate investors to take control of the

most profitable areas of the Iraqi economy, particularly the oil industry.

Washington's naked preparations to assume political power in Baghdad and take control of Iraq's oil reserves have provoked bitter criticisms among its European rivals as well as its close allies in the Persian Gulf. The ruling elites in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states fear that, as well as politically destabilising the region, a US administration in Baghdad will exploit Iraqi oil to undermine the OPEC system of production quotas and to substantially reduce oil prices.

The US plan for the Iraqi oil industry runs directly counter to the previous UN "food-for-oil" program and to international law—in a nutshell, it amounts to daylight robbery. Former Clinton energy official David Goldwyn cautiously explained to the *Washington Post*: "I don't believe that the US has the legal power under international law to seize and sell Iraq's oil absent a new Security Council resolution. It is extremely doubtful any reputable oil company will purchase oil without clear title."

France, Germany and other European powers have been pressing for the UN to play a central role in refashioning Iraq and running the oil industry in particular. Such a move would cut across US attempts to establish its own monopoly of economic and political power in Baghdad. Washington, however, has bluntly dismissed these appeals. US Secretary of State Colin Powell, who was in Brussels last week for a NATO meeting, reached no agreement with his European counterparts. "We all understand that the UN must play a role. The nature of that role and how it is played remains to be seen," he commented.

Powell has been viewed in ruling circles in Europe as a counterweight to Rumsfeld and other hard-line Pentagon officials. In reality, the sharp disputes between the US Defence and State Departments reported in the American media are of a purely tactical character—with Powell and other diplomats seeking to mollify critics of US plans in Europe and the Middle East. Powell's comments make clear that the Bush administration as a whole views any UN role in Iraq as a cosmetic one.

Washington has also relegated the various Iraqi opposition and exile groups to a secondary role. Garner's group in Kuwait has only a handful of Iraqi exiles currently working at their side. According to an article in the London-based *Times*, the team plans to hire about 100 "free Iraqis" to act as advisers to the US officials overseeing ministries in Baghdad. A toothless Iraqi consultative council will also be formed.

The bare-faced character of Washington's designs in Iraq has provoked opposition from the exile groups, some of which have been on the US payroll for years. Even Ahmad Chalabi, the favorite of Pentagon neo-conservatives, has been compelled to distance himself publicly from proposals for a US administration in Baghdad. He has called for an Iraqi-led transitional administration—a move that is backed by his own Iraqi National Congress (INC) and several other opposition groups.

At the same time, Chalabi will not be left on the sidelines. An article in the *Guardian* reported that US Deputy Secretary of Defence Paul Wolfowitz was pushing for Chalabi to have an advisory post in Iraq's finance ministry. Chalabi, an investment banker who has been convicted of fraud in Jordan, shares the pro-Israel views of the Pentagon rightwing. Wolfowitz is also pressing for Chalabi's nephew Salem and other close INC associates to have key posts in the new regime.

Another Iraqi exile—Adnan Pachachi, 79, former Iraqi foreign minister—has recently emerged as a challenger to Chalabi in any post-Hussein Iraq. He has lived in the United Arab Emirates and served as an adviser to its government, since going into exile in the late 1960s after the Ba'ath Party seized power. He was encouraged to play a role in postwar Iraq by US special envoy to the Iraqi opposition, Zalmay Khalilzad and attended the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland in January.

Pachachi has declined to join Chalabi and the INC and convened his own conference in London of 300 Iraqi exiles in late March. The gathering rejected attempts to impose a US administration in Baghdad and passed a resolution calling for the establishment of a provisional authority in collaboration with the UN. Like Chalabi, Pachachi has no fundamental disagreements with the US invasion or the installation of a neo-colonial regime. He is obviously seeking to garner support in Europe and also the Gulf States, which are seeking to use the UN to lever a greater say in postwar Iraq and a share of the spoils.

All the signs, however, point to the fact that the Bush administration intends to push ahead with the declaration of a US-controlled interim Iraqi authority regardless of international objections, and sooner rather than later. The *Washington Post* reported last Friday that Rumsfeld has sent memos to President Bush recommending that the authority be proclaimed quickly and established in southern Iraq, even before Baghdad and other Iraqi cities have fallen. The reason is self-evident: such a move would effectively pre-empt any debate in the UN and elsewhere over who is going to dictate affairs in Iraq.

Although Garner has publicly stated that his role in Iraq will be short-lived—limited to just 90 days—no one seriously believes the US will relinquish control. As a member of his team told the media: "Some of us came out here thinking it would be a three or four-month operation. Now it's clear that we're going to be here, and eventually in Baghdad, for a lot longer than we expected."

Meanwhile, hundreds of US officials wait the call in their luxury villas near Kuwait City, drawing up detailed plans and trying to make up for their collective ignorance of the history of Iraq and its people. As the *Washington Post* described the situation: "Now that the war has gone longer than they were led to expect, there is a lot of cooling of heels, and time for reading. Few of these people are Iraqi experts. But some have come armed with books and articles on the history of Iraq. The chapters on the mistakes of British [colonial] rule are well underlined."



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