

# A revealing glimpse of Washington's "free and democratic Iraq"

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What the Bush administration means by “freedom” and “democracy” in Iraq was on display at a US-sponsored meeting of selected Iraqi “representatives” held Tuesday in southern Iraq. The thoroughly contrived character of the gathering at the heavily-guarded Tallil air base demonstrates that, having invaded and occupied Iraq, Washington has no intention of permitting the Iraqi people any say in running the country.

Retired US General Jay Garner, who is soon to be installed in Baghdad as the country's quasi-colonial governor, was brought in to preside. The meeting was dominated by senior American military and civilian officials, with a token representative from each of the allies—Britain, Australia and Poland. Most were flown by military transport directly from US Central Command (CENTCOM) headquarters in Qatar, together with support staff, translators, video technicians and assorted “Arab experts”. Others came from Garner's Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Affairs (ORHA) that operates under CENTCOM auspices in Kuwait.

Assembled in an air-conditioned tent at the airbase were 80 or so handpicked Iraqi exiles, tribal sheiks, ethnic Kurds and Shiite clerics. The site, it appears, was chosen for its historic associations—nearby was the 4,000 year old ziggurat, or stepped pyramid, at Ur—to which Garner tritely referred in his opening remarks as he proclaimed the beginning of “a free Iraq and a democratic Iraq”.

He was followed by US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, who last year played the key role in installing the pro-US Afghan regime headed by Hamid Karzai in Kabul. America, he assured his audience, has “no interest, absolutely no interest, in ruling Iraq”. British Foreign Office official Edward Chaplin expressed his hopes for “a balanced and effective administration,” and, according to the pool journalist report, the Australian and Polish representatives made “less memorable” comments.

No one in the audience really believed a word of it.

Even the accounts provided by the carefully-screened journalists who were present noted that the mood was less than enthusiastic—variously described as “lukewarm,” “scattered applause” and even “sullen”. Hoshyar Zebari, a representative of the pro-US Kurdish Democratic Party, attempted to explain away the atmosphere by declaring: “They are still nervous. They don't believe Saddam is gone yet.”

It is far more likely, however, that the “invitees” were nervous about being too closely identified as American stooges. Only last week, one of Washington's political assets—Abdul Majid al-Khoei who had been flown to Najaf to exert his influence—was hacked to death by an angry mob when he attempted to visit a mosque with Haider al-Kadar, a widely-hated Shiite cleric who had been loyal to Saddam Hussein.

The Shiite-based Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)—one of six Iraqi exile groups formally recognised by Washington—decided to boycott the meeting. SCIRI spokesman Abdul Aziz Hakim issued a statement in Tehran reiterating its stance that US forces had to leave. “Iraq needs an Iraqi interim government. Anything other than this tramples on the rights of the Iraqi people and would be a return to the era of colonisation... Independence has been our manifesto. We don't accept a US umbrella or anyone else's,” he said.

Ahmad Chalabi, who is favoured by the Pentagon to head an interim Iraqi regime, also stayed away. Last week he was airlifted by the US military into the area from northern Iraq, along with some of the US-trained Free Iraqi Forces fighters, in a bid to give his Iraqi National Congress (INC) the inside running. Chalabi deemed the meeting to be of such little significance that he went to Baghdad and sent a representative in his place. His adviser told the media: “This meeting is not to select leadership spots, and... is only the first in a series.”

At the gates of the airbase, an angry crowd of about 150

voiced their contempt for the proceedings inside the air-conditioned tent. They were kept at bay by coils of barbed wire and heavily armed US marines and military police, and buzzed by military helicopters. Ali Abdul Rassak, who made the five-hour bus trip from Baghdad, said: “Before we were suffering an absence of democracy. Now it seems like we are hearing the same melody we heard before.”

A *Christian Science Monitor* reporter commented: “In general, people in the crowd felt that the conference did not represent them. They wanted to represent themselves. They were upset that the US wasn’t even telling them who was attending the conference. They were also upset at the lack of basic services in the cities such as food, water, policing, and medical care.”

Some, like Iraqi Communist Party member Mohammed Yasser, wanted to take part in the meeting. “I came here at eight in the morning and nobody let me in,” he complained to the *Washington Post*. “It can’t represent the political and social parties and movements inside the country.” Gesturing towards the base, he said: “Just imagine that. An American flag, and American forces, and they say this is the opposition of Iraq. You can judge the picture for yourself.”

Sheik Mehhi Abdulhussein from the Al-Najin tribe was also barred by US soldiers. “We came here to attend, but they won’t allow us to attend,” he declared. “All of them are agents of the Americans. All of them are working for the American interest. They have to hear our voice. I refuse such treatment! All the Iraqi people have to resist such a movement that is formed under the American umbrella.”

In the neighbouring city of Nasiriyah, Shiite groups sought to exploit the broad and growing anger over the US occupation by organising a protest. Various estimated at between 2,000 and 20,000, the demonstrators marched through the streets chanting “No No Saddam, No No United States” and “Yes, Yes for Freedom, Yes, Yes for Islam”. Placards read: “No one represents us in the conference”.

Sheik Mohammed Bakr Nasri, a leader of the Islamic fundamentalist Dawa Party who had just returned from exile, told the crowd: “We don’t need years of a transition period....The most dangerous thing is to prolong the occupation period of the coalition forces,” he warned. Another Shiite cleric Sayed Ali al-Musawi bluntly declared: “The United States and Saddam are two faces of one coin. One dictator has replaced another... We don’t want democracy brought by American tanks.”

Concern has been expressed by several pro-US Iraqi exiles that opposition to the US occupation will rapidly spiral out of control if the US imposes its own rule too blatantly. Rahman Aljebouri, a member of the Washington based Iraqi National Group, told the media: “Airlifting Chalabi and his group to Ur sent a very bad message to the people of Iraq. They are not seeing a free-spirited Iraq government—instead they are seeing Iraqis governing who work for the US. We need to get some more familiar faces in here.”

There was absolutely no sign from the Tallil air base that Washington intends to heed the warnings. Inside the tent, the various “representatives” conducted a sterile debate and rubber stamped a 13-point statement containing such injunctions as: “Iraq must be democratic”; “the rule of law must be paramount” and “Iraqis must choose their leaders, not have them imposed from outside”. The whole affair lasted less than four hours, after which everyone packed up and flew out.

The farcical character of the 13-point statement simply reflects the fact that the meeting had no power to decide anything—except perhaps the date of the next gathering. As everyone present was well aware, the real decisions were being made in Washington, CENTCOM headquarters in Qatar and Garner’s luxury villa in Kuwait.

An article in the Canadian newspaper, *Globe and Mail*, reported last Friday that a group of about 60 Iraqi exiles, dubbed the Iraqi Reconstruction and Development Council, will form “the backbone of the interim administration to replace the regime of Saddam Hussein”. It “has been working in an undisclosed building near the Pentagon in recent weeks, where its members have set up a mock government that could provide a blueprint for governing postwar Iraq.” The group is now about to fly Baghdad, where under the control of Jay Garner, it will “operate Iraq’s vital government departments.”



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