Washington's Iraqi stooge urges mass repression

Bill Vann
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Faced with growing popular resistance, social disintegration and—after a string of four devastating car bomb attacks within the last month—a clear inability to maintain order with an army of 140,000, the US occupation of Iraq has entered into a profound crisis.

In an editorial published Tuesday entitled "The US is losing its grip on Iraq," the *Financial Times*, whose views reflect the thinking within Britain's ruling elite, commented: "Facing resistance by forces they have yet to identify with any conviction, the US-led occupation authorities are unable to control the roads or the borders, the water or the electricity supply. It is now increasingly clear they are also unable to defend the allies and institutions they need to rebuild Iraq."

The newspaper put forward the prevailing view within European ruling circles—one that is shared by elements in the US State Department and some in the ruling establishment in the US—that Washington must seek another United Nations Security Council resolution giving the UN a "political mandate" for forming a "full-fledged provisional government" in order to "legitimize" the occupation.

Bringing the UN into any decision-making authority in Iraq is bitterly opposed by the dominant faction within the Bush administration, and in particular by the right-wing cabal that controls the civilian leadership of the Pentagon. They see any such move as a setback for their strategy of transforming the Middle East and America's strategic position in the world through the unilateral use of military force. Instead, their policy is one of cobbling together a Quisling regime in Baghdad as the "Iraqi face" for US occupation combined with the intensification of violent repression.

This prescription was spelled out in an opinion column published Sunday in the *Washington Post* under the byline of Ahmad Chalabi, the head of the US-backed Iraqi National Congress.

Those in the Pentagon leadership who had plotted the war against Iraq for over a decade forged intimate ties with Chalabi, proposing that he be installed as the head of a puppet government composed of Iraqi exiles once the invasion was completed. This plan was sharply opposed by CIA and State Department officials, who argued that he was a crooked opportunist who was widely hated in Iraq, a country he had not set foot in for 45 years. In the end, Washington opted for the formation of a hand-picked Iraqi Governing Council, with Chalabi holding one of its 25 seats.

On Monday, Chalabi took over the interim presidency of the governing council, a post shared by rotation among nine of its members. Jordan's Prime Minister Ali Abu Raghed took the occasion to remind the world that the new Iraqi interim president is still wanted in Jordan on embezzlement charges in connection with a $288 million fraud that led to the collapse of the Petra Bank and the fleecing of its depositors in 1989. He was sentenced in absentia to 22 years in prison for the crime.

In the *Post* column, Chalabi argues that the US should carry out a massive security crackdown in Iraq. He proposes: "Coalition forces need to move quickly to arrest and question thousands of people: Baathists, Saddam Fedayeen and former members of the security services and the military, as well as their brothers, nephews and cousins. The Iraqi National Congress and other pro-coalition groups can provide lists and locations of people and assist in their interrogations."

The former exile further advocates: "Conduct a security sweep through the towns where resistance is concentrated. Coalition forces should surround these towns and give residents a 48-hour deadline to hand in illegal weapons, after which house-to-house searches will be conducted. If a cache of weapons is found in the house, then all male residents between 15 and 50 will be arrested."

Finally, he urges, "Move quickly to establish an Iraqi security force that can take the burden of many of these tasks."

Mass arrests of suspects and their relatives, laying siege to towns and rounding up males "between 15 and 50"—all of these tactics are drawn from the most brutal traditions of foreign occupation going back to the Nazis in Europe, the French in Algeria, the US in Vietnam and today's Israeli practices in the Palestinian occupied territories.

To supplement this savage policy, Chalabi proposes the formation of an Iraqi paramilitary force, which would lend an "Iraqi face" to the wholesale repression. He maintains that he and other former exile leaders are in a better position than the American military to identify the resistance.

"You have the firepower and mobility," he writes, "we have the local knowledge and intelligence." It was Chalabi and his

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organization, it should be recalled, that provided much of the "local knowledge and intelligence" concerning Iraq's supposed development of "weapons of mass destruction" that were used as the pretext for the Bush administration launching its illegal war of aggression. A 1,400-member Iraq Survey Group, the second US military force to scour the country, recently wound up its nationwide search for these alleged weapons and is preparing to issue a final report that will reveal that it found precisely nothing.

There is no reason to believe that Chalabi's intelligence about the Iraqi resistance will prove any more reliable. Entire families will be rounded up to settle political scores or personal grudges. The elements from the Iraqi National Congress called upon to "assist in interrogations" will doubtless offer more than language skills. Their participation will give Washington the ability to deny that it is US forces that are torturing Iraqi prisoners.

This is not the first time that Chalabi has come forward as the advocate of an Iraqi force. In the lead-up to the invasion, he offered to raise an exile army, dubbed the Free Iraqi Forces. The US military trained a relative handful of recruits from the Iraqi National Congress for this task. After the fall of Baghdad, Chalabi had about 700 members of his militia operating in the country until they were disbanded by the US occupation authorities, who grew concerned about persistent reports of looting, carjacking and other criminal activities carried out by these elements.

Now Washington has announced its intention to create a new security force, to be known as Civil Defense Battalions, which together with police and border guards is supposed to put some 70,000 Iraqis into uniform as a US-led security force. The first steps in this process are reportedly the attempt to recruit members of the hated secret police of the deposed regime of Saddam Hussein as well as former Iraqi special forces troops.

The announcement came as part of the unveiling of a new 25-member cabinet that divvied up an equal number of ministries along strictly ethnic and religious lines. Iraqi observers have referred to this practice—also pursued when the US hand picked the Iraqi Governing Council—as the "Lebanonization" of Iraqi politics. They warn that the division of political spoils in this fashion can only lay the seeds for the type of bitter divisions and brutal civil war that erupted in Lebanon in the 1970s.

While touted by US authorities as a step toward self-rule, the naming of the cabinet is largely meaningless, given that the ministries lack any budgets, have been looted and their employees fired. Moreover, each minister will be assigned an American "adviser" who will wield the real power.

The new cabinet—composed almost entirely of former CIA collaborators and exiles—has no credibility in Iraq or anywhere else in the Middle East. In Egypt, the government-run daily *Al-Gumhouriyah* described the cabinet as a group of "fugitives" who are puppets of Washington. The newspaper commented: "[T]hose who govern ... come from behind the spears of occupation. They are all fugitives and people who were expelled, who lived and formed opposition groups in cabarets and nightclubs. The pinnacle of this tragedy is that Iraq's affairs are under the control of high commissioner Paul Bremer and Ahmad Chalabi and his assistants in the Iraqi National Congress. Therefore it is no wonder that Iraqi resistance operations are becoming more violent each day."

The Interior Ministry is the only one where there seem to be any concrete plans, a clear indication of the central function of the shadow regime that the US occupation authority is seeking to create. Tapped to head it was Nori al-Badran, a member of the Iraqi National Accord, a CIA-backed group including Iraqi military defectors, which in the 1990s organized terrorist bombing campaigns against civilian targets in Baghdad and an abortive coup against Hussein's regime.

The other significant appointment was that of Bahr al-Uloum as oil minister. He is the son of a Shiite cleric who suspended his membership on the governing council in the wake of last Friday's bombing in Najaf. Educated in the US, Uloum was a participant in the "Future of Iraq" conference organized by the US State Department in the run-up to the invasion. One of the central proposals advanced in the conference was the privatization of the Iraqi oil industry and its takeover by US-based energy firms. There are reportedly widespread fears among Iraqi oil professionals that Washington will use Uloum as the instrument for carrying forward just this policy.

It is this plundering of Iraq's oil wealth that was a key objective of the US invasion and a principal motive for Washington insisting on maintaining exclusive control over the occupation, despite the growing resistance and mounting US casualties.

Chalabi's proposals for Nazi-style repression are the logical outcome of a criminal war and colonial-style occupation. Both these repressive measures and the attempt to push through the predatory US economic aims in the country will only serve to intensify popular resistance.

The formation of the type of Iraqi native corps proposed by Chalabi will prove no more effective in stopping the growth of resistance than similar efforts did during the days of British and French colonialism. At most, it will prolong a bloody struggle that can be halted only through an end to the occupation and the withdrawal of all US, British and other foreign troops.

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