

The Najaf bombing: US occupation yields catastrophe

Bill Vann
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The August 29 car bombing that claimed the lives of 82 people and wounded hundreds more in the city of Najaf has underscored the catastrophe inflicted on the Iraqi people by the US war and occupation. It has also exposed the disarray within the Bush administration as it confronts a quagmire of its own making.

The blast killed its principal target, Ayatollah Mohammad Baqer Al-Hakim, the most prominent Shiite cleric to have supported the Iraqi Governing Council, the body handpicked by Washington to act as a front for its neo-colonial military occupation. The day after the attack, another Shiite cleric, Mohammed Bahr al-Uloum, announced he was leaving the council, saying the US occupation authorities had proven they “can’t do anything about the security situation.”

Iraqi police in Najaf claimed to have arrested 19 individuals in the aftermath of the bombing. They identified the suspects as members of the Islamist Al-Qaeda network and said that four members had confessed to carrying out the attack as part of a nationwide campaign to make Iraq ungovernable. Those arrested included Saudi, Kuwaiti and Jordanian nationals, as well as Iraqis, the police officials said. US intelligence officials have been more circumspect about assigning responsibility for the attack.

There is little doubt that Hakim was targeted for collaborating with the occupation. The list of those with a motive to seek his death, however, is by no means limited to Al-Qaeda and the remnants of the deposed Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein.

As the leader of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), Hakim was closely aligned with the Iranian Islamic regime for more than two decades. Teheran bankrolled and armed a SCIRI militia, the Badr Brigade. This militia reportedly fought on the Iranian side in the Iran-Iraq war, which claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis.

Until recently, the SCIRI was classified by the US government as a terrorist organization. (It retains that designation in a report issued in July by the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks). During the US invasion of Iraq earlier this year, US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld warned that members of the Badr Brigade would be treated as enemy combatants if they sought to fight independently against the Saddam Hussein regime.

Hakim and the US authorities subsequently reached an accommodation, with SCIRI agreeing to give up its heavy weapons and Hakim dropping his initial opposition to any US occupation. Instead, the ayatollah called for a transition to Iraqi rule.

While Washington harbored suspicions that the Shiite cleric was acting as a cat’s paw for Teheran, it nonetheless viewed his cooption onto the Governing Council as one of its most significant diplomatic triumphs since the occupation began. US officials have desperately sought to prevent nationalist sentiments from erupting into open revolt among the Shiites, who make up the majority of Iraq’s population.

This is a matter of grave concern not only for the US authorities in Iraq, but also for governments throughout the region. Iran’s crisis-ridden

Islamic regime fears that an eruption in Iraq could fuel increased unrest among its own population. In the wake of the US invasion of Iraq, the Saudi monarchy is facing growing unrest within its own Shiite minority, representing about 10 percent of the population and heavily concentrated in the country’s oil-rich eastern province.

The Iraqi Shiite community is itself divided. A rival cleric, Moqtada Sadr, has denounced collaboration with the occupation and agitated for increased resistance. When Hakim’s uncle narrowly escaped a bomb attack barely a week before the Najaf blast, initial suspicion fell on Sadr’s followers.

In an attempt to influence the Shiite majority in the immediate aftermath of the invasion, the US flew another friendly cleric, Abdel-Majid Khoei, back to Iraq from his London exile. He was set upon and killed by an angry mob in Najaf.

Whoever was the author of the latest bombing, the throngs of mourners in Najaf on Saturday were inclined to blame the US occupation for the tragedy. As they walked to the shrine of Imam Ali, where the attack took place, many thousands chanted, “Down with America,” and carried banners equating Bush with Saddam Hussein.

The Najaf bombing follows by just 10 days the truck-bomb attack that claimed 23 lives at the Baghdad headquarters of the United Nations. The UN bombing, in turn, came on the heels of an August 7 bomb attack on the Jordanian embassy that killed 19.

These attacks have demolished Washington’s claims that Iraq is slowly returning to “normal” and proven that the US occupying army of 140,000 troops is incapable of securing the country. The result is an exodus of United Nations personnel and non-governmental agencies that had entered Iraq to provide humanitarian relief or participate in reconstruction.

UN officials indicated in the wake of the Najaf attack that they were contemplating a complete pullout. “Within the organization, the more we find out about the situation and the more we think, we wonder about whether it is safe to maintain a mission there,” one top official told the Agence France Press news agency.

The chief of the US occupation, L. Paul Bremer, was on vacation and away from Iraq when the bombing took place. No plans have been announced for him to return early in light of the attack. An initial statement issued by his office declared merely that “The Iraqi police have our full cooperation in this important investigation.”

This hands-off approach appeared, on the one hand, to reflect shock and disarray among US policy-makers over the increasingly ominous turn of events in Iraq, and, on the other, an effort by Washington to prod the Iraqi Governing Council to take the lead in issuing public statements on such events, as part of its effort to lend the US occupation an “Iraqi face.”

A member of the council interviewed by the *New York Times* expressed the impotence of this body, telling a reporter that he thought someone was writing up a statement, but he was not sure because council members had no telephones.

In the face of the possible eruption of civil warfare within Iraq, on top of

a growing guerrilla war against US forces, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld issued a statement attributing the attack in Najaf to the “success” of the US occupation. “As success during this period of transition continues to mount, the opponents of success and of a free Iraq may continue their desperate acts,” he said.

Other administration officials have begun voicing more sober appraisals of the deteriorating situation facing the US occupation. Bremer himself recently declared that it was “almost impossible to exaggerate” the cost of reconstruction in Iraq, saying it would require “several tens of billions of dollars” in funding from other countries.

Neither he nor anyone else in the administration, however, has broached the issue of what it will cost the US government. The \$2.5 billion appropriated by Congress for that purpose, together with money expropriated from foreign Iraqi bank accounts, has already run out, and the administration appears poised to seek another \$3 billion just to maintain operations in Baghdad until another budget is submitted later this year. Costs associated with the military occupation alone are now running at approximately \$1 billion a week. This is on top of the \$1 billion a month being spent on continuing military operations in Afghanistan, now approaching the end of their second year.

Initially, Bush administration officials had projected that the cost of occupation—not to mention the lucrative, no-bid contracts awarded to Republican-connected corporations like Halliburton and Bechtel—could be paid for by pumping and selling Iraqi oil. This, like so many of the government’s assumptions about postwar Iraq, has proven illusory.

The oil fields were left in a shambles as a result of a decade of economic sanctions, war damage and postwar looting. Continuous sabotage has disrupted attempts to reap any profit from oil production. On August 30, the pipeline carrying oil from the northern Kirkuk fields to Turkey was engulfed in flames following an explosion—the fourth such blast to damage the line since it was reopened briefly in early August.

Attempts by Washington to drum up economic and military support for its colonial project in Iraq have come up empty-handed, according to a report published Sunday in the *Los Angeles Times*. “US officials say their effort to secure more aid, which some jokingly call ‘Operation Tin Cup,’ has been long and frustrating,” the newspaper reported.

Meanwhile, casualties among US occupation troops continue to mount. Two more soldiers were wounded in a rocket-propelled-grenade attack near the northern city of Kirkuk Saturday. One hundred and forty three have died just since May 1, when Bush declared major combat operations at an end. The postwar death toll has topped that incurred during the invasion itself.

Since the outset of the war, the Bush administration has rejected any substantive UN role in Iraq. It jealously guards exclusive US control as a means of securing unfettered domination of the country’s oil wealth and assuring that American corporations reap the profits from the privatization of Iraqi industry and reconstruction of war-damaged infrastructure. Washington is determined to forge a client regime that will uphold its interests in the region and guarantee it continued access to military bases and Iraqi oil.

The most extreme right-wing elements, centered in the Pentagon and the office of Vice President Cheney, also see Iraq as a test case for the doctrine of pre-emptive war and the unilateral use of military power to secure the interests of American capitalism around the world. These forces, which exert the dominant influence within the Bush administration, would consider the granting of any decision-making role to the UN over the occupation of Iraq to be a humiliating and dangerous retreat.

Nonetheless, the State Department’s deputy secretary, Richard Armitage, last week floated a proposal in the media for increasing the UN’s role in the military occupation. The apparent aim of this proposal was to secure some kind of UN resolution that would provide political

cover for Turkey, Pakistan and India to send troops into Iraq to bolster the US military effort.

In opposition to such a turn, elements within the civilian leadership of the Pentagon as well as the Iraqi Governing Council have called for the speedy formation of an Iraqi militia to take over much of the security operation from the US. This proposal is apparently being promoted most vigorously by Ahmad Chalabi, the US-backed Iraqi exile and convicted bank embezzler who has avid sponsors within the Pentagon.

Prior to the war, a protracted struggle raged between those, primarily in the Pentagon and Cheney’s office, who proposed quickly installing Chalabi as the head of a puppet regime following the toppling of Saddam Hussein, and those, primarily in the CIA and the State Department, who discounted Chalabi’s claims to popular support among the Iraqis and considered his installation as a US Quisling a recipe for disaster.

Initially, the anti-Chalabi faction won out, and his US-trained militia, the so-called Free Iraqi Forces, was disarmed and disbanded in the early days of the US occupation, after it was seen to be involved in criminal activities. Now, in the face of looming disaster for the US occupation, the pro-Chalabi faction feels emboldened to demand once again the promotion of their man as the US-backed Iraqi strongman.

Any effort to forge a unified Iraqi militia would undoubtedly encourage the various groups collaborating with the US—Chalabi, the SCIRI, the Kurds—to promote their own militias as the dominant force, creating further fuel for the eruption of civil warfare.

The deepening quagmire in Iraq is the product of an illegal war launched to further the interests of the US corporate elite. Contrary to the prescriptions of “liberal” pundits and Democratic politicians—ranging from the introduction of more US troops to greater UN authority to the rapid creation of an Iraqi stooge regime—nothing progressive, democratic or humanitarian can come from such a criminal undertaking. The Iraqi people did not ask the Americans and British to invade and occupy their country. The indispensable precondition for the genuine reconstruction of Iraq is the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US and allied troops from the country.

This must be accompanied by a thorough, independent and public investigation into the conspiracies and lies that led to this imperialist war, and the punishment of those politically responsible.



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