

US “turning point” in Iraq—deeper into the abyss

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Seven months after Baghdad fell to US troops, Washington is unveiling a crisis strategy that combines the attempt to consolidate an Iraqi puppet regime with the unleashing of a redoubled military onslaught against the Iraqi people.

The shift in policy follows the killing of over 61 US and other occupation troops in just the first two weeks of November and a series of devastating attacks—the most recent and deadliest claiming the lives of 31 people, including 18 Italian Carabinieri in the southern city of Nasiriyah. These attacks, suggesting a coordinated offensive by the Iraqi resistance, have severely undermined US attempts to restore stability and win increased international backing for its occupation.

The near universal recognition that the US has reached a “turning point” in Iraq was triggered by the sudden recall of Baghdad consul Paul Bremer to Washington for emergency meetings, combined with the leaking of a Central Intelligence Agency report that portrays the situation on the ground in Iraq in far grimmer terms than any US officials have thus far dared to admit.

The report said the number of attacks on US forces have climbed to between 35 and 70 a day and estimated that some 50,000 Iraqis are currently participating in a steadily growing resistance movement.

“A growing number of Iraqis believe US troops can be defeated and are supporting the insurgency,” the CIA report warned, according to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. It added that Washington’s attempt to impose a pro-US regime in Iraq “could collapse unless corrective actions are taken immediately.”

The report went on to warn that whatever the US does risks further alienating the Iraqi people and increasing popular support for the resistance. If Washington fails to crush the insurgents, it said, it will only convince the Iraqis that those fighting to defeat the occupation will win. On the other hand, it warns that “more aggressive US counterinsurgency tactics could induce more Iraqis to join the guerrilla campaign.”

The report, which was endorsed by Bremer, constitutes an implicit repudiation of everything the Bush administration has said about the occupation—from the claims that those opposing the US occupation are merely a collection of Baathist “dead-enders,” foreign terrorists and criminals, to its browbeating of the media for failing to report the “good news” from Iraq.

The thrust of the new US political plan appears to be the creation of a “provisional government” through adding additional members to the existing Iraqi Governing Council, which has barely functioned in any capacity since it was created by the US occupation authorities.

Press reports indicate that Washington is considering a proposal to utilize the approach employed in Afghanistan where it convened the *loya jirga*, a selected national council of political notables, tribal elders and warlords who were browbeaten by US officials into forming a Washington-backed Quisling government.

While previously the US had proposed that a constitution be drafted and elections held before the creation of such a regime, it is now pressing for

the speeding up of this process by forming a regime first and leaving the constitution and popular vote for later. The conception is that such a regime would enjoy a “legitimacy” that the present setup lacks. How this would be possible under conditions in which the US continues to occupy the country with 130,000 troops and jealously guards all substantive decisions has yet to be explained.

If anything, the latest proposal is even less democratic than the one that Washington has apparently now deemed inoperable. In postponing the drafting of a constitution, the Bush administration is merely putting off intractable problems that will ultimately explode into new conflicts.

The US administration fears that any genuine popular vote for a constituent assembly would place power in the hands of the Shiite majority and potentially lead to an Islamic state structured along the lines of neighboring Iran. Such a development could in turn lead to the country’s descent into civil war between the Shiites and the minority Sunni and Kurdish populations.

As Secretary of State Colin Powell acknowledged in a media interview Friday, Washington sees no viable candidate for chief of state capable of winning broad support from the Iraqi people.

Among those who have been lobbying most aggressively for the creation of a provisional government is Ahmed Chalabi and his Iraqi National Congress. Chalabi, convicted of a massive bank fraud in Jordan, is the favorite of the right-wing clique of civilian officials in the Pentagon who were the war’s principal authors and proponents. They had initially advocated forming a provisional Iraqi regime in exile with Chalabi at its head to be installed as soon as US forces conquered Baghdad. This plan was opposed, however, by both the State Department and the CIA, which warned that Chalabi enjoyed no popular backing in Iraq and that such a regime would be rejected as illegitimate.

It is quite possible that, behind the renewed talk of “turning power over to the Iraqis,” this reactionary plan to install Chalabi as a US-backed ruler is being resurrected. Chalabi has advocated the escalation of repressive measures to crush the resistance and, if brought to power, would no doubt preside over a ruthless dictatorship.

There are a number of conflicting interests underlying the calculations of the Bush administration. Among the most pressing is the drive to realize the main goal of the illegal war in Iraq, the looting of the country’s resources, and in particular its vast oil reserves. The profit windfalls that the US ruling elite had foreseen as the byproduct of military conquest cannot be realized under present conditions.

While the US occupation authorities have proposed a “shock therapy” economic program that would place on the auction block some 200 Iraqi state enterprises employing half a million workers and open up the country to unrestricted foreign investment, a number of problems have emerged in implementing these plans.

First, it is universally acknowledged that for an occupying power to carry out such sweeping changes is a blatant violation of international law. “Most authorities believe that Iraq will need a legitimate government

before permanent changes can be made in its laws, economy and institutions,” a report written in June for the US Congress stated.

Second, there is little prospect that US corporations will rush to set up operations in the middle of what remains a war zone. Those that did decide to buy up Iraqi assets would do so only to the extent that they were sold at a fraction of their value, ensuring that the bulk of these enterprises would be shut down, with their workers joining the estimated 60 to 70 percent of the population that is already unemployed.

On the other hand, the Iraqi crisis is increasingly viewed within the Bush camp through the prism of the US election calendar. It is feared that if US casualties and chaos continue in Iraq into the 2004 campaign, it will cost Bush the White House. According to press reports, the plans for speeding up the imposition of a “sovereign” puppet regime call for some form of election to be held in mid-2004, presumably to precede the Republican Party’s national convention and allow Bush to claim, once again, a “mission accomplished” in Iraq.

The least important considerations entering into the administration’s plans are the well-being of the Iraqi people and the fate of the 130,000 US troops who have been sent to kill and die to further the interests of Halliburton and other politically connected corporations that are profiteering off the occupation.

The present crisis confronting US policy in Iraq is the inevitable outcome of a predatory war carried out on false pretenses and in open contempt for international law as well Iraq’s national sovereignty.

The Bush administration’s conception was that unleashing overwhelming military force would shock the Iraqi people into accepting whatever setup Washington sought to impose. It viewed the profound conflicts and contradictions that have plagued Iraq throughout its history with a combination of ignorance and indifference. Now it is reaping the consequences.

There is within Washington’s sudden shifts in strategy an air of disarray and even panic. That being said, the US is not about to abandon its neocolonial project in Iraq. Both the administration and the Democratic Party leadership are agreed that the occupation must continue. For the American ruling elite, a withdrawal from Iraq would represent an unacceptable defeat and the abandonment of a region where it views US hegemony as vital for its global interests.

Therefore, while talking about turning over power to its Iraqi collaborators, Washington has made clear that it will continue its military occupation for the foreseeable future.

Bush, in an interview with the *Financial Times* of London Friday, said it was “inconceivable” that the US would withdraw its troops from either Iraq or Afghanistan. “We are not pulling out until the job is done. Period,” he said.

Meanwhile, there are ominous indications that this “job” will be prosecuted through a resumption of the war against the Iraqi people. The US Central Command (CENTCOM) announced that it is shipping several hundred personnel back to Qatar, which served as its operations base during the invasion of Iraq last spring. Sources cited the deteriorating situation on the ground as the principal reason for the move.

On Tuesday, General Ricardo Sanchez, the senior military commander in Iraq, presented prepared remarks to the media that heralded the launching of full-scale combat operations: “Although the coalition can be benevolent, this is the same lethal instrument that removed the previous regime, and we will not hesitate to employ the appropriate levels of combat power.” Later, in response to questions, he added, “What we are embarking on here is the absolute necessity to defeat the enemy,” in pursuit of which the “application of all combat power that is available to us” would be used.

US forces have begun using massive firepower in a show of force aimed at intimidating Iraqi resistance. The initial offensive was launched in the area around Tikrit last weekend with the dropping of 500-pound bombs

near the area where a US Blackhawk helicopter was brought down by Iraqi fire, killing six soldiers.

In Baghdad, the US military has mounted an operation dubbed “Iron Hammer” with similar air strikes and use of heavy artillery in crowded urban areas. Among the targets hit was a textile plant that was pummeled by fire from an AC-130 gunship. No weapons were found in the industrial facility and its owner, employees as well as people living in the area expressed mystification and anger over the destruction caused by the US attack.

Some of the bombings appear designed largely to bolster the sinking morale of US troops and convince the American people that something is being done to stem mounting US casualties. “One military official said the aim of Operation Iron Hammer was not so much battlefield advantage as creating a perception that the United States has taken the initiative,” the *Washington Post* reported Friday. “We are using conventional capabilities to shape the information fight,” the official said.

But the use of greater firepower is inevitably leading to a greater toll in Iraqi lives. In one incident Wednesday, an Apache helicopter gunship was sent to attack a van that US military spokesmen claimed was carrying suspected guerrillas. Two men were killed and three others wounded in the attack. Again, no weapons were recovered from the vehicle.

In Fallujah on Thursday, townspeople buried four men and an eight-year-old boy who were shot to death by US troops manning a roadblock earlier in the week. While the Pentagon claimed the five were part of a group plotting an attack on a US military compound, witnesses said they were farmers and their truck was loaded with chickens.

At the funeral, Khalid Khalifa al Munwar, a 65-year-old chicken farmer, expressed his rage. “My sons are dead, my grandsons are dead. Where is the freedom? I want God to punish the Americans. God will punish them and give us revenge.”

General John Abizaid, the Commander of CENTCOM, has said that the US military may be moving toward a strategy in which US troops would be withdrawn to heavily fortified garrisons, leaving the day-to-day patrols and raids to newly trained Iraqi security forces and intervening with massive military force wherever the Iraqi resistance poses a threat to the occupation regime.

“What we are moving towards is Iraqi policing of Iraqi cities, Americans on the outskirts, Americans moving in conjunction with Iraqis to deal with security problems beyond their control,” he said at a press conference at CENTCOM’s Tampa, Florida headquarters Thursday.

He reiterated that the plans for creating some kind of Iraqi provisional regime would not spell a withdrawal of US forces. “I think people sometimes misinterpret political timetables for Iraqi governance and security to think that there is a rush to leave,” he said. “We are not in a rush to leave. We will stay as long as we need to, to ensure that Iraq is secure, that the handover makes sense and that a moderate Iraqi government emerges.”

Having invaded Iraq, US imperialism has no viable way out the crisis it has unleashed. Whatever regime it creates under occupation will be viewed as illegitimate. The repressive violence that it is now unleashing to stifle the Iraqi resistance will inevitably create greater hostility among the Iraqi people and a growing number of recruits for the resistance itself.

This bloody spiral of violence—in which both major parties are implicated—must inevitably create an intractable political crisis within the US itself.



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