

UN summoned to salvage US plans for Iraq

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The arrival of a UN team in Baghdad on Saturday to broker a deal between competing Iraqi elites is another demonstration of the political quagmire created by the illegal US-led invasion of the country. Confronting continuing armed attacks on US and allied troops and broad popular opposition to its occupation, the Bush administration has been compelled to turn to the UN to salvage its plans to hand over formal sovereignty to an Iraqi administration by June 30.

The US proposals were never about establishing genuine independence or democracy in Iraq. The country continues to be occupied by tens of thousands of foreign troops and every decision in Baghdad is subject to the veto of US authorities. Rather, Washington hoped to give a veneer of legitimacy to a puppet regime in Baghdad that would sanction the continued presence of the US military and the economic plunder of the country by American corporations. Moreover, the handover was timed to provide the maximum boost to President Bush's reelection campaign.

Last November the US proconsul in Baghdad, Paul Bremer III, outlined plans for an interim constitution and a national assembly to enable Washington to claim that "independence" and "democracy" had been established. Bremer proposed that 18 regional caucuses—vetted and controlled by US officials—be established to choose the members of the national assembly. The proposals were duly ratified by the Bush administration's handpicked stooges who make up the Iraqi Governing Council (IRC).

Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and other prominent Shiite clerics opposed the plans and insisted instead on direct elections to determine the composition of the assembly. Backed by large demonstrations in southern Iraq, Sistani dismissed Washington's objection that polls were impossible due to the lack of security and time. He has refused to meet with Bremer or other US officials.

Sistani's stance presented the US with a major political problem. If it chose to simply ignore the cleric, it risked the emergence of mass political opposition among the southern Shiites who constitute 60 percent of the Iraqi

population. On the other hand, if it bowed to the demand for elections, then the outcome of the poll—no matter how contrived and controlled—could well be an assembly dominated by figures, critical of or openly hostile to the continued US presence. A US official told the *Washington Post* that the whole issue was so sensitive that it was regarded as a "radioactive topic" in the White House.

The extent of the US predicament has been underscored by the fact that the Bush administration has been forced to turn to the UN after insisting last year that the organisation should play a minimal role in Iraq. As one US official told the *New York Times*: "We are trying to put this issue in [UN Secretary General] Kofi Annan's lap and let him run with it. There's still very much the intention to stick with the date of June 30. But there's a lot of pressure on Kofi Annan to come up with the right solution."

Having officially sanctioned the US occupation of Iraq, the UN has now agreed to act as a political proxy for the US and carry out its dirty work inside the country. Annan has dispatched a team to Iraq, ostensibly for the limited purpose of determining if elections could be held before June 30. It is clear, however, that the team's brief is far broader: to try and sort out a compromise that is acceptable both to the competing Iraqi factions and, above all, to the US. Significantly, under pressure from Washington, the team is headed by former UN special representative to Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, who oversaw the installation of a US puppet regime in that country.

Annan has expressed a degree of trepidation over security for the team, pointing to the massive bomb blast that struck the UN headquarters last August, killing more than 20 people, including UN special representative Sergio de Mello. But the concern over "security" expresses deeper fears in UN circles that the bomb blast reflected far broader hostility throughout Iraq to the UN role in sanctioning the 1990-91 Gulf War and policing a decade of punitive economic measures that cost the lives of an estimated half million people.

There is no guarantee that UN officials will be able to carry out the task assigned by the Bush administration. While Sistani has indicated that he may abide by UN recommendations, a younger Shiite cleric Moqtada Sadr, who has a political base among the urban poor in Baghdad, has denounced the UN as “dishonest” and “subservient to America”. Even if Sistani were to agree to the UN proposals, it is far from certain that other Shiite religious leaders would fall into line.

The fundamental problem confronted by the US in Iraq is that the vast majority of the population regards its invasion and occupation of the country as illegal and illegitimate. Those sentiments have been compounded by the country’s deepening social crisis—chronic unemployment and the lack of essential services, including clean water and electricity in many parts of the country.

Leaders like Sistani and Sadr are seeking to exploit the broad distrust and popular opposition for their own sectarian purposes, and in doing so are exacerbating ethnic and religious tensions. The Shiite clerics are pressing for elections not out of any concern for the democratic aspirations of ordinary working people but because they feel a direct vote would be the best means for consolidating a Shiite majority in a national assembly—an aim that is opposed by the political leaders based in the Kurdish and Sunni minorities.

The demands of the Shiite clerics for an “Islamic state” have already come into conflict with various secular parties—in particular the two parties that dominate the Kurdish north of the country. The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), which played a key role in backing the US invasion, have been demanding the establishment of a federated state structure under which the Kurds would have substantial political autonomy. Sistani has opposed the granting of autonomy to the Kurds, especially the inclusion of the northern oil-rich area around Kirkuk in any Kurdish zone.

These sharp ethnic and sectarian tensions have been evident in the Iraqi Governing Council which has been haggling over the content of an interim constitution that is due to be finalised by the end of the month. While the draft document has not been made public, a recent *New York Times* article indicated that the key questions—how the national assembly and prime minister are selected, whether Kirkuk would become part of a Kurdish region, etc—all remain undecided.

PUK official Adel Murad described the tense situation in comments published on Antiwar.com. “Everyone in

Iraq is now worried. The Kurds are worried. The Shiites are worried. The Sunnis are worried. The Turkomans and Assyrians are worried. Everyone is worried because nobody trusts the other group. Everyone is afraid that the other group might try to impose its will on the others.”

Sections of the Iraqi Governing Council, concerned to hang onto their positions of power, are adamantly opposed to any elections. Figures like Ahmed Chalabi, head of the Iraqi National Congress and a convicted financial embezzler, are urging Washington to transform the existing council into the national assembly by the expedient method of adding more appointees.

Chalabi, who has no significant political base inside Iraq, is counting on his connections in Washington to wield his influence within any appointed assembly. A recent article in the *Los Angeles Times* revealed that Chalabi and his associates are using their ties to wealthy Iraqi exiles to mount a high-powered and very expensive lobbying exercise inside Washington. Chalabi was accorded pride of place seated next to First Lady Laura Bush when the president delivered his State of the Union speech to Congress last month.

The UN team currently in Iraq has been handed the task of finding a compromise between these competing, and in some cases, diametrically opposed, interests of the privileged elites. Whether it is capable of doing so or not remains to be seen. One thing, however, is certain: whatever political solution is finally imposed on Iraq by Washington will have nothing to do with meeting the democratic aspirations of ordinary working people. The essential precondition for the establishment of genuine democracy in Iraq remains the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of US and all foreign troops from the country.



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