

UN endorses US plans for an unelected Iraqi government

James Conachy
3 March 2004

The UN has stepped forward once again to legitimise the neo-colonial agenda of the US in the Middle East. The UN fact-finding mission sent to Iraq last month has endorsed the key elements of the Bush administration's plan to hand over formal sovereignty to an unelected Iraqi administration, subservient to Washington's needs, by a deadline of June 30.

The US only called in the UN after its own proposals began to fall apart. The US Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) signed an agreement with its handpicked puppet—the 25-member Iraqi Governing Council—last November. Under its terms, an interim national assembly was to be inaugurated on June 30, 2004. Its representatives were to be chosen by caucuses comprising the local and provincial councils that have been installed by the US and allied military forces since last March.

The Bush administration formulated the plan amid an escalating wave of guerrilla attacks on US troops and growing concerns that the US presidential election would be dominated by the deteriorating situation in Iraq. The aim was to establish a compliant Iraqi regime and to put its police and security forces on the frontline in place of American soldiers.

Domestically, Bush could present this agenda to American voters, increasingly opposed to the US military presence in Iraq, as the beginning of an “exit strategy”. At the same time, the new “sovereign” government would provide the legal fig leaf needed to sanction the US corporate looting of Iraq, above all its oil reserves, and the ongoing US military occupation.

But the plans immediately ran into opposition. Shiite clergy came out against the November agreement and the lack of any vote for the first post-invasion government. Shiites comprise up to 60 percent of the country's population. In large parts of the country, particularly the south, Shiite-based religious parties have filled the vacuum left by the overthrow of Hussein's Baathist regime and hoped to dominate any elected parliament.

The plan was also opposed by others. Under the US

proposals, the future interim government would be obligated to honour agreements between the existing Governing Council and the US. Many Iraqis feared that such agreements would include everything from the awarding of long-term contracts over oil resources to the designation of Iraqi territory as permanent bases for the US military and ongoing immunity for US troops from the provisions of Iraqi law.

In January, Shiite Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani called for demonstrations in favour of direct elections, rejecting the US claims that none could be organised in time for the June 30 deadline. Tens of thousands of Shiite Iraqis responded with mass protests in major cities such as Baghdad, Basra and Najaf. Already confronting a guerrilla insurgency in the predominantly Sunni Muslim areas, the opposition to the November agreement threatened to ignite social unrest in the Shiite south as well.

As the situation deteriorated and Sistani refused to negotiate, Washington concluded that the caucus plan was unviable and called for help from the UN. The UN brief was to use whatever influence it had to cajole Sistani and others into accepting the most important aspects of the Bush administration's agenda—forming an Iraqi government of its choice on June 30.

The UN was initially reluctant, citing fears over “security”. The real concern, however, was whether it had the political standing among Iraqis necessary to carry out the job. As far as millions of Iraqis are concerned, there is no essential difference between the UN and the US occupying forces.

Since the first Gulf War of 1990-1991, the UN has functioned as the accomplice of US aggression against Iraq. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis died as a result of UN sanctions, which were justified as the means of disarming Saddam Hussein's regime of “weapons of mass destruction”. The UN directly facilitated the US drive to war throughout 2002, passing resolution 1441 that warned of “serious consequences” if Iraq failed to comply with a tough new weapon inspection regime. While the UN Security

Council did not formally sanction the illegal US-led invasion, it formally recognised the US occupation of Iraq last May—including its control over reconstruction contracts and the revenues from Iraqi oil.

Iraqi hostility towards the UN was highlighted by the bombing of the UN's Baghdad headquarters last August, in which dozens of its employees were killed or injured, including its top official in the country, Sergio Vieira de Mello. The UN pulled its personnel out the country, above all, to distance itself from the occupation and preserve what remained of its reputation.

The UN's return to Iraq in February was not motivated by concern for the Iraqi people, but reflected growing fears among the other major powers about the destabilising consequences of the US occupation for the Middle East. The fact-finding mission was asked to assess the "feasibility" of holding direct elections before June 30; determining a time frame that would be required to hold "credible" elections; and to determine whether there were "other options" to elections that could be presented as reflecting the "will of the Iraqi people".

To head the team, the US asked for UN Under-Secretary-General Lakhdar Brahimi, who was instrumental in installing Hamid Karzai, Washington's chosen candidate, as the unelected president of Afghanistan with sweeping executive powers. From February 6 to 13, Brahimi and his team held a series of meetings with members of the Governing Council, with other Iraqis cooperating under the occupation and with Shiite leader Sistani, who had consistently refused to meet with representatives of the CPA.

The report of the fact-finding mission, sent to the UN Security Council on February 23, reflected the content of the talks. It noted the opposition to the US caucus plan and that the "legitimacy and legality" of the November agreement "has been questioned by many Iraqis". While posturing as sympathetic to the democratic aspirations of the Iraqi people, it opposed any suggestion of a popular vote, citing security concerns and lack of time, until at least next year. As it did in Afghanistan, the UN declared that Iraq is on "a long road toward establishing democratic governance" and that "elections in themselves do not constitute democracy".

To justify its stance, the UN report warned that "sectarianism is becoming entrenched" and "inter-communal politics more polarised". There was "massive unemployment", "rising anger and disillusionment" and the "underlying tensions could fuel the existing potential for civil strife and violence". The argument is completely cynical. The UN is exploiting the social chaos, which it has helped to create, along with the armed resistance to an illegal US occupation, which it has sanctioned, to justify the further trampling on democratic rights.

After one week of talks with selected Iraqi leaders, the UN report declared the June 30 deadline "meets the wishes of the Iraqi people for a quick transition" to a sovereign state. Except for ruling out an election, the fact-finding mission made no recommendation on how an interim government should be formed. It was supportive, however, of the method now favoured in Washington. The report suggested that enlarging the Governing Council to between 150 and 200 appointees might create a legitimate "transitional legislative council".

Sistani responded favourably to the UN recommendations, declaring that he now accepted that a government would be formed according to the US schedule and without a ballot. Sistani's comments suggest that Brahimi may have given him some indication that Washington would permit a greater influence for the Shiite clergy within the unelected interim body.

The overall impact of the UN mission has been to give some political breathing space to the Bush administration. The Governing Council and Bremer have been able to push ahead with the behind-the-scenes horse-trading over an interim constitution, which is due to be formally announced shortly. Brahimi is expected to return in April to mediate talks on how the interim government is to be selected.

A team from the UN's election unit will travel to Iraq to begin consultation on organising a ballot sometime in 2005. However, the UN has already signaled in advance that the issue of security could be used to delay elections indefinitely. The mission's report declared that "an improved security environment is a *precondition* for the conduct of free and fair elections" [emphasis added].

The UN intervention does not alter the actual political situation in Iraq. It is a country under military occupation and the victim of an illegal war of aggression conducted by the US—all of which has been sanctioned by an increasingly discredited UN. No Iraqi government installed or elected under the barrels of American guns will have any legitimacy. The precondition for the Iraqi people to be able to democratically determine their own fate is the immediate, unconditional withdrawal of all US and foreign military and other personnel.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact