

White House pushes ahead with plans for Iraqi puppet state

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21 May 2004

Tuesday's memorial ceremony for Izzedin Salim, the assassinated president of the US-appointed Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), was symbolic of the state of affairs in Iraq. The representatives of the occupation—whether American, coalition, UN or Iraqi—are viewed with such hostility and are so fearful of the Iraqi people that the ceremony could only take place before a carefully vetted audience inside the heavily fortified Green Zone compound in the centre of Baghdad.

There has been little public mourning for Salim. His willingness to work with the US and serve on the IGC made him a traitor in most Iraqi eyes.

Nevertheless, Salim's death is a further blow to the Bush administration's plans to install an unelected interim government in Baghdad on June 30, and portray it, in Iraq, the US and internationally, as the restoration of sovereignty to a legitimate Iraqi government. The assassination at the front gate of the Green Zone—just weeks before UN special envoy Lakhdar Brahimi is scheduled to nominate the government's composition—has reinforced the sense that the US occupation is confronting disaster.

The White House's propaganda effort last year sought to ennoble its predatory seizure of an oil-rich and strategic country by calling it "Operation Iraqi Freedom". The predictable reality has been determined opposition within Iraq to a colonial invader, and increasingly murderous efforts by the US military to crush the resistance. Tens of thousands of Iraqis have been killed or maimed; cities and holy sites have been bombed; and young men have been seized off the streets and tortured.

The repression has both broadened and hardened the resistance, leading to the eruption last month of a popular uprising behind Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, and the defiant Iraqi defence of the city of Fallujah. Any Iraqis who choose to provide political support to the US do so in the knowledge that they are placing themselves at odds with the mass of the population, over 80 percent of whom report in opinion polls that they want the American and allied troops out.

Former IGC human rights minister Adb al-Bassit Turki, who resigned his post in protest over the Abu Ghraib torture revelations, articulated the feelings that now exist toward the occupation, even among those who were initially prepared to work with it. Speaking to the German newspaper *Der Spiegel*, Turki declared: "I also resigned because the Americans have indiscriminately attacked Iraqi cities with helicopters and aircraft, because they have behaved inhumanely during house searches, because they have stolen and taken away the dignity of human beings. It became clear to me that the Americans were not interested in resolving problems peacefully. Instead, they were truly obsessed with using military force to deal with all kinds of difficulties."

US troops, Turki warned, "can only remain if asked to by the Iraqi people. Otherwise they should definitely leave".

An expression of broader sentiment is to be found in the May 7 entry into the "Baghdad Burning" web blog (<http://riverbendblog.blogspot.com/>). The author, a 24-year-old woman living in Baghdad, wrote: "I sometimes get emails asking me to propose

solutions or make suggestions. Fine. Today's lesson: don't rape, don't torture, don't kill and get out while you can—while it still looks like you have a choice... Chaos? Civil war? Bloodshed? We'll take our chances—just take your puppets, your tanks, your smart weapons, your dumb politicians, your lies, your empty promises, your rapists, your sadistic torturers and go."

In an article commenting on the perception the US is failing in Iraq, the *Washington Post* reported on Tuesday: "Iraqis close to the negotiations by UN special envoy Lakhdar Brahimi are now warning that credible politicians or technocrats may not be willing to accept jobs in the interim Iraqi government. 'Anyone in his right mind would say what you're giving me is an impossible task and a no-win situation,' said an Iraqi adviser to a member of the Iraqi Governing Council."

Ignoring the mounting opposition, the Bush administration has used Salim's death to announce it is pushing ahead with its agenda regardless. Bush told journalists on Wednesday: "I anticipate in the next couple of weeks, decisions will be made toward who will be the president and the vice president, as well as the prime minister and other ministers." According to Bush, the US intends to put a resolution before the UN Security Council that "will embrace the interim government"—i.e. give it a figleaf of international legitimacy—and recognise "the need to provide security"—i.e. sanction the protracted presence of US troops in Iraq.

Thirteen months after an invasion carried out in the name of bringing "liberation" and "democracy," the Bush administration has dropped the pretence of forming an Iraqi government that reflects, in even the most limited way, the will of the Iraqi people. US officials will hold direct authority over all the key institutions—state finances, the armed forces and media and communications.

The interim government's character was spelt out in an article in the May 13 *Wall Street Journal*. Headlined "Behind the scenes, US tightens grip on Iraq's future," the piece outlined the steps taken to ensure that the Iraqi government "will have little control over its armed forces, lack the ability to make or change laws and be unable to make major decisions within specific ministries without tacit US approval".

In March, Paul Bremer, the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), issued a law that placed "operational control" of the Iraqi military under the US command in Iraq. Iraqi troops are under the orders, not of an Iraqi government, but the Pentagon.

A media and telecommunications commission appointed by Bremer will have immense powers over the media, including the power to "shut down news agencies". In a sign of the contempt with which the Bush administration views the Iraqis who are working for it, the IGC minister of communications, Haider al-Abadi, was not informed that a body had been created to remove most of his ministry's authority. "No-one from the US even found time to call," he told the *Journal*.

A Board of Supreme Audit—also appointed by Bremer—will have representatives in every Iraqi ministry, with powers to monitor all contracts and expenditure. The US-installed members of the board will

have a five-year term of office and cannot be removed except by a two-thirds vote in an elected Iraqi parliament—when one exists. US “advisors” will remain in every ministry, reporting to a virtual parallel government operating out of the American embassy in Baghdad, which, with over 3,000 staff, will be the largest in the world.

In a transparent statement of who really rules—“sovereign” Iraqi government or not—the US had decided to locate its embassy in the former palace of Saddam Hussein, the most prominent official building in Baghdad and widely viewed among Iraqis as the seat of state authority.

Six weeks before an interim government is to be formed, no-one in Iraq even knows who is likely to sit in it. Its composition is being decided in secretive negotiations between US officials and the UN’s Brahimi. This is the “freedom” that tens of thousands lives have been lost or ruined for—naked American imperialist domination over a long oppressed, but oil-rich, country in the Middle East.

The evolution of the Bush administration’s plans for an Iraqi puppet state shows how the reality of mass opposition has continually disrupted the self-delusion within the American establishment that the Iraqi people would submit to colonial rule.

The initial calculation was that the Iraqi population, after decades of dictatorship and more than 20 years of war and economic deprivation, would accept whatever Washington dictated. The post of Iraqi president was intended for one of the pro-US Iraqi exiles, such as Ahmad Chalabi. Defence department officials confidently predicted 60,000 troops would be sufficient to control Iraq within a matter of months.

After the “shock and awe” invasion, the UN resolution of May 22, 2003, gave indefinite control over every aspect of Iraqi society, including its oil and energy revenues, to the US-controlled CPA—with the only stipulation being a review in 12 months.

By the beginning of June 2003, the euphoria in Washington had evaporated. It was apparent that a guerilla war was well-entrenched against the occupation and that the Iraqi exiles, particularly Chalabi, had little or no social base in the country. Instead of the US military reducing its troop numbers, it was extending demoralised soldiers’ tours-of-duty and carrying out major raids on rebellious cities in the predominantly Sunni Muslim areas of central Iraq.

The escalating fighting led directly to the unexpected formation of the IGC in mid-July. The original proposal to give the occupation an “Iraqi face” involved convening a national congress of Iraqi dignitaries to elect its representatives. Under conditions where the US could not be completely certain who would be chosen, the congress plan was scrapped, and Bremer simply hand-picked the IGC’s 25 members. The IGC would act as a “consultative body” to the CPA until mid-2004, when the possibility of holding elections would be considered.

The formation of the IGC did nothing to bring any substantial layer of the Iraqi population behind the occupation. The Council was universally viewed as little more than a collection of American puppets.

By November 2003, one year out from the US presidential elections, the debacle in Iraq had plunged the Bush administration into a major crisis. The guerilla resistance was killing or wounding more and more American and allied soldiers. Fuelled by resentment over unemployment, social conditions and the martial law conditions of the US occupation, the first signs of a Shiite uprising were evident in clashes between occupation forces and al-Sadr’s Mahdi Army militia in the working class suburbs of Baghdad. Within the US, recriminations against the White House were increasing. The head of the Iraq Survey Group, David Kay, had bluntly reported to the US congress in October that no weapons of mass destruction had been found.

Bremer was recalled for emergency talks in Washington and a new plan was unveiled. The CPA would convene “caucuses” in Iraq’s 18 provinces, attended by representatives vetted by the US military, and they would elect an “interim government” to take office on June 30, 2004. The

IGC would draft an interim constitution. In the months leading up to the US elections, Bush could portray the constitution and government as the realisation of “democracy” in Iraq.

Accompanying the new political plan was another massive escalation in the military violence against the Iraqi people, aimed at breaking the back of the resistance in the Sunni regions of the country. Cities such as Fallujah, Samarra, Baqubah, Thuluya and Balad were raided repeatedly, with thousands of men dragged off to detention camps.

Once again, however, the US attempts to present as “democratic” a government formed through brutal repression without any participation by the Iraqi people only provoked greater opposition. In January, hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Shiites took part in demonstrations called by the leading Shia cleric Ali al-Sistani to demand elections. Sadr threatened that the Mahdi Army would join the armed resistance if the US plans were not changed.

Confronted with the prospect of a Shiite rebellion, the decision was made, as the *New York Times* put it in November 2003, to “throw the hot potato” of forming an Iraqi government into the UN’s lap. The caucus plan was quietly abandoned and the Bush administration requested that Brahimi investigate other means of selecting an interim regime.

During February, Brahimi toured Iraq to try to convince Sistani and other sections of the Shiite elite that elections were not possible and that a “sovereign” government would have to be subordinate to the US military. The UN proposed that, instead of caucuses, the IGC—regarded by most Iraqis as nothing more than a US front—be enlarged from 25 members to 200.

The cynical and anti-democratic political maneuvers with the UN began to collapse immediately. Most Iraqis rejected as illegitimate the interim constitution adopted by the Governing Council on March 8, which was largely drawn up by Bremer, and enshrined US control over Iraq. The Shia religious establishment, adapting to the popular sentiment, began preparing mass demonstrations to demand its revision.

The US again answered the growing opposition with an escalation in repression. Plans were drawn up for a crackdown on al-Sadr and a murderous assault on Fallujah, to make it an example of what would happen to any other centre of resistance. These were put into motion at the end of March, with the banning of Sadr’s newspaper and incursions by marines into Fallujah.

The recklessness of the American calculations is demonstrated by the outcome of the latest US military offensive. More than 150 Americans were killed and 1,100 were wounded in April alone, as Baghdad and the Shiite south of Iraq erupted to defend al-Sadr, and the people of Fallujah fought marines to a standstill in the city’s outer suburbs. The bulk of the US-recruited Iraqi army, civil defense troops and police either deserted to join the uprising or refused to fight.

Two leading figures in the IGC, including the leader of the Marsh Arabs, resigned in protest over the mass US killing of civilians. Sistani and other “moderate” Shiites have been compelled to distance themselves from the US and UN plans for an interim government. The US actions produced recriminations even from Ahmad Chalabi and his Iraqi National Congress (INC), the closest stooges of the US occupation—no doubt the underlying reason for the raid on his home and the INC headquarters yesterday.

Ultimately, the mass dimensions of the resistance forced the US marines to make a humiliating backdown in Fallujah, leaving the city under the control of the resistance fighters. Sadr is now the most popular figure among Iraqi Shiites and continues to defy the occupation from the holy Shia shrines in the city of Najaf.

Amid the debacle, Bush has announced he will outline the details of an interim government during a speech in Pennsylvania on Monday. Brahimi has been in Iraq since May 13 to line up the individuals who will serve in it. Exactly to whom he is talking is unclear. Every justification for the

American colonial project in Iraq has been utterly discredited and every Iraqi political figure with a meaningful base of support is opposed to a regime handpicked by the US and UN. Only the most venal and corrupt elements of the Iraqi elite would agree to take part.

No government of this kind, predicated on an ongoing American military presence in Iraq and US control over Iraq's economy, will ever be accepted by the Iraqi people. Far from undermining support for the armed resistance sweeping Iraq, the US military now expects the installation of the US puppet state to fuel it. The commanding US general in the country, John Abizaid, told a congressional hearing on Wednesday that the "situation will become more violent" after the June 30 handover "because it will remain unclear what's going to happen". "It's possible that we might need more forces," he said.

The invasion of Iraq is a shameful chapter in American history. It can be ended only by a movement of the American and international working class fighting for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of US and allied forces, reparations to the Iraqi people and the prosecution of the Bush administration for its war crimes.



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