

Washington sought to suppress UN report on progress of democracy in Middle East

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In the run-up to the invasion of Iraq two years ago, George W. Bush appeared before the American Enterprise Institute in Washington to set out his administration's vision for a "liberated" Iraq within the context of a revamped Middle East under US domination.

Speaking before the right-wing think tank on February 26, Bush cited the 2002 Arab Human Development Report (AHDR), the first such report released by the United Nations Development Program, to support his argument that a US invasion and occupation of Iraq were necessary if peace and democracy were to flourish in the Middle East.

Referring to the findings of the AHDR, Bush stated, "There are hopeful signs of a desire for freedom in the Middle East. Arab intellectuals have called on Arab governments to address the 'freedom gap' so their peoples can fully share in the progress of our times." According to Bush, the US had the duty to fill this gap by conquering and subjugating the Iraqi people. "Operation Iraqi Freedom" was launched less than a month later with the bombardment of Baghdad.

The United Nations Human Development Program's latest AHDR has not been so warmly received by the White House. In fact, according to an April 6 article in the *New York Times*, its release was delayed for six months, while Bush administration officials sought to block it.

The administration objected to the report's conclusion that over the past two years the US occupation of Iraq and continued Israeli aggression in the West Bank and Gaza have been major factors in the suppression of freedom and democracy in the Arab world. This, of course, directly refutes US government and media propaganda to the effect that the US intervention has sparked a flowering of democracy in the Middle East.

For the conspirators in Washington, the answer to such a difficulty is as simple as it is obvious: use extortion to sanitize the report, or bury it.

Times Accounting, the Bush administration, threatened to reduce financing for the UN Development Program if conclusions in the report critical of the US occupation were not removed. In the end, the report's authors—including prominent Arab scholars working with the United Nations Development Program, the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, and the Arab Gulf Program for United Nations Development Organizations—released it essentially intact on April 5 in Amman, Jordan, with what they have referred to as only minor changes.

For its part, the UN Development Program attached a disclaimer to distance itself from the report's conclusions.

An examination of the report shows why the Bush administration sought to scuttle it. Contrary to the administration's claims to be carrying out a crusade to free the Iraqi people, the AHDR paints a devastating portrait. It concludes that two years of war and occupation in Iraq have resulted in widespread death, suffering and wholesale violations of basic human rights.

Under the subhead, "The Impact of the Occupation of Iraq on Human Development," the report states: "As a result of the invasion of the country, the Iraqi people have emerged from the grip of a despotic regime that violated their basic rights and freedoms, only to fall under a foreign occupation that increased human suffering..."

The study reports an estimated 100,000 Iraqi deaths in the first 17 months of the war, stating that "the largest number of victims fell during search-and-arrest operations, as a result of shootings at demonstrations, or at road-blocks and checkpoints and through the shelling of residential areas."

The authors charge: "The occupying powers failed to meet their obligations under the Geneva Conventions to provide security to citizens." They cite a BBC report that, as of April 2004, US and British forces were holding more than 5,300 Iraqi prisoners. AHDR states that "a

large proportion of detainees were civilians who were arrested in the course of search operations and raids.”

The report refers as well to the revelations of torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and other facilities. The authors write: “While the American-British Coalition leaders condemned the violations, they also claimed initially that they were isolated cases rather than the result of a deliberate policy or of a systemic problem.” The report’s authors counter this claim, saying that Amnesty International “had received numerous similar reports of torture and other ill-treatment of Iraqi prisoners by Coalition forces.”

When Bush spoke in February 2003 at the American Enterprise Institute, he predicted that “success in Iraq could also begin a new stage for Middle Eastern peace, and set in motion progress towards a truly democratic Palestinian state.” The 2004 Arab Human Development Report presents a very different picture.

Under the subhead “Israeli Occupation of Palestine Continues to Constrain Human Development and Freedom,” the report states that the re-occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, and stepped-up raids into the area, have inflicted “significant human and material devastation”—including the deaths of 768 Palestinians between May 2003 and the end of June 2004, close to a quarter of them children.

Many of the statistics cited in the 2004 AHDR on Iraq and the Occupied Territories have been substantiated by human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and Human Rights Watch.

Commenting on the report, US State Department spokesman Richard A. Boucher dismissed its conclusions as “gratuitous.”



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