

Amid “civil war” warnings, Rumsfeld flies to Iraq

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Amid growing concerns in Washington over the intractable conflict in Iraq and the instability of the US-backed regime there, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld staged his latest emergency flight to Baghdad Wednesday.

These unannounced, high-security visits to Iraq have become almost routine. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice staged one last May—bundled into the country in a combat helmet and a flak jacket—to press the transitional government headed by Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari to bring elements of the Sunni Muslim elite into the process of creating a permanent Iraqi regime.

Rumsfeld himself had come to the country just a month earlier on a similar mission—seeking to persuade Jaafari and the Shia-dominated regime not to purge former Baathist officers from the Iraqi security forces that the Pentagon is attempting to train and deploy.

The US defense secretary’s latest mission to Baghdad—his tenth since the war began and his third this year—was of a similar sort. He flew into Iraq to order the panel drafting a new Iraqi constitution to “get on with it” and warn them against seeking a six-month extension of their August 15 deadline, which would in turn push back the timetable for elections later this year. A vote has been scheduled on the constitution in October, and, if it is ratified, the election of a new government is set for December.

Meeting these artificially imposed deadlines has become for Washington one of the few available measures of success under conditions in which it has been unable to either quell growing resistance to its military occupation or make even minimal headway in the reconstruction of the war-ravaged country.

Those drafting the constitution, however, are sharply divided between representatives of the Shia religious-based parties that form the majority and the Kurdish and Sunni groupings. With barely two weeks until the deadline, they have reportedly yet to agree even on what to call the country, much less on thorny issues such as federalism, the role of religious law and women’s rights.

“We don’t want any delays,” Rumsfeld told reporters on the plane en route to Baghdad. “They’re simply going to have to make the compromises necessary and get on with it. That’s what politics is about.” Any procrastination, he added, would be “very harmful to the momentum that’s necessary. We have troops on the ground. People get killed.”

Indeed they do. The past month has seen multiple attacks daily, many involving suicide bombings, claiming hundreds of Iraqi lives in July alone. According to one recent report, the number of corpses turning up at the Baghdad morgue amount to around 30 a day, nearly all of them victims of violence. Thus far this month, 46 US troops have been killed—three of them on the day Rumsfeld was in

Baghdad—bringing the total US fatalities since the invasion to at least 1,790.

Yet, Rumsfeld’s injunction notwithstanding, there is no viable political compromise that would rescue Iraq from the bloody debacle unleashed by the US invasion and occupation.

Armed violence in Iraq has shifted increasingly toward attacks on civilians. Bomb blasts have taken an escalating toll particularly among the Shia population. Meanwhile, there are numerous reports of death squads organized by the Shia militias carrying out reprisal killings against Sunni civilian leaders.

Attempts by the Jaafari government to include Sunni representatives in the drafting of the constitution broke down last week after two of the 15 Sunni members co-opted onto the constitution committee were assassinated July 19 on a Baghdad street, prompting a boycott by their co-religionists.

While the Sunni representatives returned to the process on Tuesday, there is little certainty that an agreement on a constitution will be reached and even less that such a document will serve to quell rather than intensify the mounting violence.

Drafts of the constitution published in the Iraqi press indicate that the document will likely proclaim Iraq an “Islamic republic,” asserting that Islam is the sole legitimate basis for legislation. It is also reported that it will relegate all matters of family law to religious courts, while abolishing explicit references to women’s rights, thereby turning the clock back decades in terms of social progress in Iraq.

Meanwhile, the Kurdish minority, which under the US-imposed ratification process holds veto power over any charter, is insisting on a loose federal system that would grant the effective power over the country’s north to Kurdish politicians. The Kurdish leadership is seeking to expand the area it controls to include the multiethnic city of Kirkuk and is demanding substantial control over the region’s oil wealth. The Shia religious parties are expected to press for similar control in the south.

Behind all the Bush administration’s hollow rhetoric about turning Iraq into a beacon of democracy in the Middle East, there is an increasing tone of pessimism within ruling circles and the military over the situation in the occupied country.

Thus, in an article entitled “If it’s civil war, do we know it?” John Burns of the *New York Times* wrote: “From the moment American troops crossed the border 28 months ago, the specter hanging over the American enterprise here has been that Iraq, freed from Mr. Hussein’s tyranny, might prove to be so fractured by politics and religion ... that it would spiral inexorably into civil war.... Now, events are pointing more than ever to the possibility that the nightmare could come true.

Burns noted that Washington’s newly appointed ambassador to Iraq,

Zalmay Khalilzad, raised the threat of civil war twice in a speech given before flying to Baghdad this week.

Khalilzad, who functioned as an American proconsul in Afghanistan, exercising the real power behind the façade of Hamid Karzai's government, has interjected himself directly into the Iraqi constitution debate. "You don't want to do things that build the infrastructure for a future civil war or warlordism," he declared.

Behind such expressions of concern, the Bush administration and the Pentagon have systematically fostered ethnic and religious divisions as a means of divide-and-rule in Iraq.

An accompanying article in the *Times* provided a glimpse into the increasing demoralization within the US military. It quoted a "senior Army intelligence officer" as saying, "We are capturing or killing a lot of insurgents. But they're being replaced quicker than we can interdict their operations. There is always another insurgent ready to step up and take charge."

The article cited US commanders as stating that the number of attacks on US troops and the fledgling US-trained Iraqi security forces continued unchanged at the rate of about 65 a day. It pointed out, however, "Despite months of assurances that their forces were on the wane, the guerrillas and terrorists battling the American-backed enterprise here appear to be growing more violent, more resilient and more sophisticated than ever."

The precarious position of Jaafari's interim government found clear expression in his joint press conference with Rumsfeld Wednesday. The Iraqi prime minister called for a speedy end to the US military occupation and revealed that he had complained to Gen. George Casey, the top US commander in Iraq, about recent killings of Iraqi civilians by US troops. In the same breath, however, Jaafari added, "We do not want to be surprised by a withdrawal that is not in connection with our Iraqi timing."

Clearly, the shaky interim regime can have no credibility with the Iraqi people unless it distances itself from the hugely unpopular occupation, while at the same time, it has no prospect for survival without the protection of the US military.

General Casey responded to Jaafari's comments by declaring that a "fairly substantial" reduction in the 138,000 US troops now deployed in Iraq could take place by the middle of next year.

Casey conditioned any such reduction in US forces on political developments going "positively" and on progress in the training and deployment of Iraqi security forces.

Last month, Lt. Gen. John Vines, a senior US commander in Iraq, said that the US occupation force could be reduced by about 20,000 troops next year.

A classified British Defense Ministry document leaked earlier this month indicated that one scenario called for US troops to be reduced to 90,000 by next year. Given that most military analysts insist that the present American occupation force is woefully understaffed for securing the country and the fielding of credible Iraqi security forces is seen by most to be years away, if ever, such projections seem far-fetched.

At present, US commanders have admitted that barely 3,000 Iraqi troops are capable of fighting on their own. What they fail to add, however, is that virtually all of these units are made up of former members of the Kurdish *peshmerga* guerrilla movement, whose first loyalty is not to the regime in Baghdad, but rather to the Kurdish nationalist leadership.

Much of the talk about troop cutbacks is undoubtedly aimed at assuaging the mass opposition to the occupation that exists in both

Iraq and the US, as well as at propping up the sinking morale of US military personnel. Yet, there are indications that Washington is contemplating a shift in strategy.

Speaking to reporters on his flight to Baghdad, Rumsfeld declared that the US military was "shifting its weight away from essentially doing counterterrorism activity and security patrols to continuing to do heavy lifting in terms of the counterinsurgency and doing more and more of our work directly with Iraqi security forces. Not just training and equipping them, but operating with them, and embedding our forces with them."

Such a strategy could see US troops withdraw from large areas of the country, pulling back into large permanent military bases located in the predominantly Sunni provinces. From there, they could carry out raids against rebellious sections of the population and retaliation against attacks on Iraqi puppet units.

The Iraqi regime's national security adviser, Mowfaq al-Rubaei, said during Rumsfeld's visit Wednesday that a joint US-Iraqi commission was planning for a handover of security functions from US to Iraqi forces in at least 10 cities and some Baghdad neighborhoods. Initially, this would consist largely of turning over Kurdish areas in the north and Shia populations in the south to ethnically based militias.

Rumsfeld also indicated that Washington is actively seeking to "transfer the responsibility for Iraqi prisoners to the Iraqi government." US forces have detained over 15,000 Iraqis—virtually all without charges and most without any suspicion of armed activity—at four major prison camps, and the Pentagon has been forced to use an increasing number of US troops as prison guards.

The prospect of turning these detainees over to the Iraqi regime represents a deepening of US war crimes—essentially the "Iraqification" of the torture and abuse revealed at the Abu Ghraib prison and elsewhere. There have been increasing reports that torture and summary killings of those detained by Iraqi security forces are endemic.

Human Rights Watch issued a recent report that detainees held by Iraqi security forces are routinely beaten with cables, hung from their wrists for long periods and given electric shocks to sensitive parts of the body. Bodies of murdered detainees have also borne wounds inflicted by electric drills driven into victims' knees, elbows and shoulders.

Washington has no intention of withdrawing its military from Iraq. It invaded the country in 2003 based upon longstanding plans to assert US hegemony in the oil-rich Persian Gulf by means of military power. It has not abandoned this objective, the steady loss of life and the \$1 billion-a-week costs of the occupation notwithstanding.

Among the issues that Rumsfeld indicated he was pursuing in his talks with the Iraqi interim regime is the negotiation of a new agreement—either through another United Nations resolution or the conclusion of a bilateral "status of force agreement" between Baghdad and Washington. The aim is to legalize the presence of US troops in the country into the indefinite future and assure their immunity for war crimes prosecution.



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