

Bush administration drags Iraq towards the abyss of civil war

The Editorial Board
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Since the destruction of the Al-Askariya mosque last Wednesday in Samarra, Iraq has been convulsed by sectarian violence between Shiite and Sunni Muslim militias. A vicious cycle of reprisals and counter-reprisals has claimed hundreds of lives, including dozens of men from both denominations who have been dragged from their homes and executed in the street. As the third anniversary of the US invasion approaches, there is talk of civil war.

The Bush administration and the American media have expressed shock and dismay at this turn of events. Friday's editorial in the *New York Times* was a case in point. "Iraqi leaders from all religious groups and communities need to exert a calming influence", it pontificated, concluding: "Creating a new Iraq that is at once democratic, unified and stable was never going to be easy. Now it has become a lot harder".

No small amount of cynicism and deceit was required to write such lines. In the face of the sectarian clashes, mouthpieces of the US ruling elite such as the *Times* expect people to forget that in March 2003 the Bush administration launched an illegal and unprovoked war against Iraq. The prospect of fratricidal conflict stems directly from this brutal and reckless crime.

The invasion was not carried out to bring democracy, unity or stability to Iraq, but to impose a US puppet state and create conditions for the US corporate plunder of the second largest oil reserves in the world. The military devastation of what the Pentagon knew was a defenceless country was also intended as a warning to all potential rivals to the US, from the European powers to China, of the consequences of challenging American interests.

Among the key planners of the war, the invasion of Iraq was viewed as only the first in a series of interventions in the Middle East to establish US dominance over the region where a large proportion of the world's oil and gas is derived. Iran is now the subject of threats by the Bush administration over its alleged nuclear programs that are ominously reminiscent of the build-up to the attack on Iraq. Syria is also the target of repeated provocations.

Former news presenter Ted Koppel—a defender of the war and an ideologue of the American imperialist mission—wrote in the *New York Times* on Friday that "keeping oil flowing out of the Persian Gulf and through the Straits of Hormuz has been bedrock American foreign policy for more than a half-century". While the *Times* editorial repeated propaganda about democracy, Koppel bluntly concluded that the invasion of Iraq was aimed at establishing bases, dominating the region and "about the oil".

The cost has been the shattering of Iraqi society. After first ruining the country with the 1991 Gulf War and 12 years of economic sanctions, high-tech weaponry was unleashed in March 2003 to destroy its infrastructure. Upon entering Baghdad, American troops carried out massacres and encouraged an orgy of looting to break down civil institutions and exhaust the already traumatised population.

The first signs of opposition after the invasion were answered with

repression, involving indiscriminate killings of protestors, night raids, mass round-ups, and the perverse torture at prisons such as Abu Ghraib, all of which were designed to break the will of the population to resist. Sunni Arab areas of the country, where the former Baathist regime was believed to have its greatest base of support, were targeted with particular ferocity.

At the same time, no serious attempt was made to repair the damage that was done by the sanctions and the war. Billions of dollars of so-called reconstruction funds have either been stolen or squandered on dubious contracts with companies like Halliburton.

Millions of Iraqis have been reduced to a hellish existence, without jobs or the reliable provision of the preconditions for civilised life, such as electricity, sewerage, running water, and health care. The few remaining welfare provisions for the population, such as subsidised fuel and food, are being systematically eliminated. Law and order has collapsed, with criminal violence claiming hundreds of lives each month. In the absence of any alternative perspective, people have turned to family, tribal or religious networks for both protection and assistance.

In a comment in the *New York Times* on February 24, columnist Thomas Friedman cynically uses the danger of civil war to justify the continued US military occupation. "The point is simple: the world is drifting dangerously toward a widespread religious and sectarian cleavage—the likes of which we have not seen for a long, long time. The only country with the power to stem this toxic trend is America," he opined. The US military presence, however, is directly responsible for the escalating conflict.

The US occupation has been based on communal politics from the outset. Exiles, CIA stooges and émigré businessmen who had no base of support in Iraq, such as Iyad Allawi and Ahmad Chalabi, have been slotted into governing positions at various times. However, the main organisations upon which the US has relied are Kurdish nationalists who want to establish an ethnically-based canton in the north and Shiite fundamentalists who aspire to impose an Iranian-style Islamic state.

The north of Iraq—which was already effectively partitioned off by the no-fly zone imposed after the 1991 Gulf War—has been defined as a separate Kurdish region, with its own government, laws and military forces. In return, Kurdish troops have been deployed in Fallujah, Mosul and other predominantly Sunni areas to assist the US military crush opposition. A campaign of ethnic cleansing is continuing in the area around the city of Kirkuk, with thousands of Arabs and Turkomen being pressured to leave the oil-rich region so it can be incorporated into the Kurdish mini-state next year. Militias have been formed to resist the Kurdish nationalist agenda.

In exchange for the participation of the Shiite elite in the regime, the Bush administration held out the promise of access to both state power and lucrative oil revenues. The election in January 2005 resulted in a large majority for the Shiite parties and the appointment of Shiite fundamentalist Ibrahim al-Jaafari as prime minister. The new

constitution—written in 2005 in consultation with US ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad—establishes the mechanisms for the establishment of a regional government in the Shiite south that would have control over as much as 60 percent of the country's oil and gas.

The Shiite parties have used their grip over the government to direct a reign of terror against their opponents. Many units of the Iraqi military, which still operates under US command against the insurgency, were recruited from Shiite areas. Some make no attempt to hide that their first loyalties lie with the Shiite clergy and their sectarian animosities toward Sunnis.

The interior ministry has been controlled by the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), which recruited hundreds of its Iranian-trained Badr Brigade militiamen into police units and deployed them as death squads. Hundreds of Sunnis or secularists have been executed in horrific fashion.

The dirty war by the Shiite government has exacerbated the reactionary attacks on Shiite civilians by Sunni extremist organisations like Al Qaeda, which accuses the entire Shiite population of collaborating with the occupation. The number of Shiite militias has burgeoned over the past year in response, as have demands for revenge.

Now, under conditions of growing tensions between Washington and the Shiite theocracy in Iran, the Bush administration is demanding that the Iraqi Shiite factions disband their militias and surrender their control over the security ministries to Sunni-based parties—the very forces they had been seeking to marginalise. Shiite leaders have issued bitter recriminations against both the US and Sunni formations.

In this atmosphere of rising communal hostility, it was inevitable that an incident was going to trigger open confrontation. The destruction of the Shiite shrine in Samarra has now done so.

A civil war in Iraq would potentially produce greater horrors than communal fighting in countries such as Lebanon or the former Yugoslavia. Baghdad, a highly integrated city with a population of six million, is almost evenly divided between adherents of both branches of Islam. Any conflict in Iraq would also inevitably spill over its borders, drawing in neighbouring states such as Sunni-dominated Saudi Arabia and Jordan, and Shiite Iran.

The American ruling elite was not only aware that the overthrow of the Baathist regime would plunge Iraq into sectarian conflicts and the broader Middle East into instability, its most consistent advocates—the so-called neo-conservatives—based their strategy for the region on precisely such an outcome.

In 1997, David Wurmser, for example, who is now the principal deputy assistant on national security affairs for Vice President Dick Cheney, assessed that Baathist states in Syria and Iraq were in terminal crisis. He wrote: “Underneath facades of unity enforced by state repression, their politics is defined primarily by tribalism, sectarianism and gang/clan-like competition. It is unlikely that any institution created by tyrannical secular-Arab nationalist leaders, particularly the army, will escape being torn apart.... The issue here is whether the West and Israel can *construct a strategy for limiting and expediting the chaotic collapse* that will ensue in order to move on to the task of creating a better circumstance.” (emphasis added)

This was the strategy adopted following the September 11, 2001 terror attacks on the United States. The Bush administration planned to invade Iraq, overthrow the Hussein regime, dissolve the Iraqi Army and impose a pro-US puppet government. The conception in the White House and the Pentagon was that military “shock and awe” would terrorise the population and suppress the emergence of tribal, sectarian and social antagonisms.

In the final analysis, US imperialism launched itself on a reckless attempt to refashion the political landscape that established in the Middle East by Britain and France in the aftermath of World War I, when most of

the Arab states were carved out of the former Ottoman Empire on the basis of arbitrary lines in the sand. Insofar as it had a strategy, the Bush administration based itself on the infamous declaration of the *Wall Street Journal* in 1991, “Force works!” It has now been brought face-to-face with the fact that complex historical contradictions cannot be bombed away.

The prostration of the Arab regimes in the face of US militarism stems from the weakness of the capitalist class in oppressed regions such as the Middle East. As Leon Trotsky explained at the beginning of the twentieth century in his *Theory of Permanent Revolution*, the bourgeoisie in such countries are organically incapable of leading any consistent struggle against imperialism, which of necessity involved the arousing of the working class and impoverished masses. Unable to meet the democratic and social aspirations of ordinary working people, nationalist leaders invariably bow to the dictates of imperialism and quell social convulsions with the naked use of force.

The Baathist regime in Iraq was a case in point. Iraq was created out of three provinces of the former Ottoman Empire under a British mandate. The Sunni Arab propertied class, which had served the Ottomans in Baghdad, was kept in power by British imperialism to rule over Shiite tribes in the south, and a Kurdish population in the north, that was left arbitrarily divided by imperialism in the nations of Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria.

The development of industry and a large working class heightened the antagonisms within the country. The unresolved national and social divisions led to repeated conflict and uprisings—by Shiite organisations, Kurdish movements and above all, by the working class. The Baathists came to power through the suppression of the working class, especially its most militant sections in the Communist Party. These attacks were fully supported at the time by both the Sunni and Shiite religious hierarchy as well as by Washington. It then carried out mass repression against the Kurdish and Shiite rivals of the Sunni establishment.

Likewise, the resistance movement that developed following the US invasion in the predominantly Sunni central and western regions of Iraq reflects the venality of the Iraqi ruling class. While exploiting the widespread and justified popular hostility to the US occupation, the unstated aim of its political leadership is to pressure the US occupation into restoring the privileges of the traditional Sunni establishment. The Sunni elite remains hostile to the aspirations of the masses, which they view as a far greater threat to their interests than the takeover of the country by American imperialism.

The resistance has therefore been incapable of making any broad appeal to the millions of Shiite and Kurdish workers and rural poor who suffered decades of repression at the hands of the Baathists. Instead, the masses of all backgrounds are being used as pawns in a struggle among various communal cliques—Sunni, Shiite and Kurd—for positions in a US client state.

The regimes elsewhere in the Middle East are no different. On behalf of a small ruling class, they suppress the aspirations of the masses for democracy and decent living standards while assisting in the plunder of the region by transnational corporations. All of them are increasingly relying on nationalism, racism and sectarianism to divide a restless working class and divert social tensions into the dead-end of communal conflict.

The only progressive alternative is the perspective of the International Committee of the Fourth International: the construction of a mass socialist movement, based on the working class, to fight for the abolition of capitalist property relations and a United Socialist States of the Middle East that eliminates all the irrational national borders.

This struggle, as part of the broader international fight for socialism, is the means to unite working people—Sunni and Shiite, Arab and Jewish, Muslim and Christian, Kurdish and Turkish—and establish their political

independence from all factions of the bourgeoisie. In the United States and internationally, the same perspective must animate the demand for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all American and foreign troops from the region.



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