

The ramifications of Ahmadinejad's visit to Iraq

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8 March 2008

The visit to Iraq on March 2 and 3 by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad highlights the profound impact of the US invasion on political relations throughout the region. The US occupation of the country has unleashed processes that the American ruling elite did not foresee and does not welcome.

Ahmadinejad is the first head of the Islamic Republic of Iran to visit Iraq since the overthrow of the pro-US regime of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in 1979. Within a year of the Iranian revolution, Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, with the tacit backing of the US and its regional allies, invaded Iran and initiated a murderous war that lasted until 1988 and claimed over one million lives. Relations between the two states were subsequently dominated by hostility and suspicion.

In stark contrast to the decades of enmity, Ahmadinejad was kissed, hugged and feted by the leadership of the American puppet government in Iraq. Iraqi president, Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani, publicly proposed that Ahmadinejad call him “Uncle Jalal”, to symbolise the closeness of the Iraq-Iran relationship.

Unlike American dignitaries, who fly into the country in secret and are not able to leave heavily guarded compounds, Iraqi officials saw no problem with Ahmadinejad driving down the major road from the airport—once dubbed the “Highway of Death” by US soldiers—and making a night-time visit to the mausoleum of two of the 12 Shiite Imams. An entire 30,000-strong Iraqi army division was assigned to his protection. One thousand Kurdish pesh merga militiamen provided a personal bodyguard.

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki stood supportively alongside Ahmadinejad as he baldly stated: “Iraqi people do not like America.” The Iranian leader proceeded to launch a scathing criticism of the

US occupation. “The presence of foreigners in the region has been to the detriment of the nations of the region,” he declared. “It is nothing but a humiliation.... The people of this region have got nothing from the occupation here except damage, sabotage, destruction, insults and degradation.... We believe that the forces that came from overseas and travelled thousands of kilometres to reach here must leave the region...”

The Iranian president signed a seven-point agenda for closer economic ties between Iran and Iraq and pledging \$1 billion to assist with the reconstruction of Iraqi infrastructure. Iran is already Iraq's largest source of imports, with trade between the two states over \$8 billion per year. Pointedly, new proposals include the provision of electricity, some of which would be generated by Iran's nearly completed nuclear power plant that the US accuses of being a front for a nuclear weapons program.

In the days following the US invasion on March 20, 2003, the last thing that would have been predicted in Washington is that five years later a fundamentalist Iranian president and opponent of US policy would be welcomed to Baghdad, allowed to condemn the American presence and outline a plan to economically entwine Iraq with Tehran.

The militarist cabal in Washington had a very different future in mind. The Iranian regime was the second on Bush's “axis of evil” list. There is every reason to believe that as US tanks rampaged through Baghdad, the expectation in the White House was that, certainly by 2008, they would have returned Iran to the status of a US client state as well.

Instead, US imperialism has confronted setback after setback in its agenda of establishing domination over the energy resources of the Middle East and Central Asia—nowhere more so than in Iraq itself. The Sunni

Arab base of Hussein's Baathist regime launched a bitter guerilla war within days of Baghdad's fall. By April 2004, the US occupation confronted an even more threatening uprising among the Shiite working class and urban poor. To prevent the insurgency escalating, Washington depended upon the Shiite clergy headed by the Iranian-born Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and Shiite fundamentalist parties with religious and political ties with Iran, particularly what is now named the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI).

The pay-off was the acceptance by the US that the puppet government would be dominated by the Iraqi Shiite elite, rather than by various stooges cultivated by the CIA among the Iraqi exile community during the 1990s, such as Iyad Allawi and Ahmad Chalabi. The Shiite ascendancy led to the outbreak of a vicious sectarian civil war in 2006 between rival Shiite and Sunni factions, in which hundreds of thousands of Iraqis were killed or displaced and hatred of the occupation vastly intensified.

Even after the death of over one million people and the utter destruction of the country's social fabric and infrastructure, an insurgency against the US presence still continues in both Sunni and Shiite areas. Last year, the US military was compelled to "surge" its occupation force to over 160,000 troops—half the available combat units of the American Army and Marine Corp. The crisis for the Pentagon is expressed most clearly in the fact that it has to hire more than 100,000 mercenary contractors to supplement its own forces.

While US spending on "Operation Iraqi Freedom" drains the US treasury of more than \$5 billion per month, little progress has been made toward opening up Iraq's vast oil and gas reserves to exploitation by American corporations. Moreover, the instability that the war has produced is a factor in the rise of oil prices to over \$100 per barrel and global inflationary pressures.

The Iranian regime, by contrast, has benefited from the quagmire. The US invasion overthrew Iran's main regional rival—the Baathist regime. China and Russia, both threatened by the US attempts to dominate energy supplies, have sought out closer ties with Tehran and sought to limit the impact of the Bush administration's accusations that Iran is seeking to construct nuclear weapons. In the Middle East, the stalling of US efforts

to remove the Iranian regime has led pro-US states such as Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia to distance themselves from the US antagonism toward Iran. Instead, they have opened up closer diplomatic and trade relations.

The same calculations underlie the welcome given to Ahmadinejad by the dominant pro-occupation political factions inside Iraq—the Shiite alliance as well as the Kurdish nationalist parties, which have established an autonomous region in the country's three northern provinces. US imperialism, they fear, will ultimately be compelled by economic or political pressures to abandon its militarist attempt to dominate the Middle East. Iran, however, a country of 70 million on their doorstep, is a power with whom they will need to deal with.

The obvious question is whether there is any validity in an assessment that the American capitalist class will accept having only marginal influence over the exploitation of world's main oil and gas supplies. Any serious analysis of the past 30 years and particularly the years since September 11, 2001, indicates that the answer is a definitive "no". US imperialism is determined to retain its hegemonic position in the region and internationally. Its instrument for doing so is the massive military machine it possesses and its criminal willingness to trample over all the norms of post-war inter-state relations. Both parties of the American ruling elite, Republican and Democratic, subscribe to the Bush doctrine of "pre-emptive war"—the "right" of the United States to attack any country deemed to be real or potential threat to American interests.

Ahmadinejad's demand that the US leaves the Middle East was answered on Tuesday by the second-in-command of US forces in Iraq, Lieutenant General Ray Odierno. He accused Tehran of supplying weapons to insurgents attacking US troops and labelled Iran as the greatest "long-term threat" to Iraq's stability. The logic of these geo-political tensions is more likely to be war than US withdrawal.



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