

Britain: ISSE holds meetings on the fifth anniversary of Iraq war

Our correspondent
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Earlier this month, the International Students for Social Equality held a series of meetings to mark the fifth anniversary of the Iraq war at the University of Glasgow, University of Manchester, the London School of Economics and Brighton University.

Addressing the meeting in Glasgow, *World Socialist Web Site* Editorial Board member Julie Hyland explained that the campaign of disinformation and lies used to justify the war still continues.

“Earlier this month, in what was hailed as a victory for freedom of information, the secret first draft of the ‘dodgy dossier’ that notoriously set out the trumped-up case for the invasion of Iraq, was released,” she noted. The document had confirmed that Labour’s spin-doctors had indeed been involved in its drafting and that the first version did not include the spurious claim that Iraq could mount a chemical attack on its enemies within 45 minutes.

“The allegations that the document had been ‘sexed up’ to meet political ends—the charge that led to the death of whistleblower Dr. David Kelly and the convening of the Hutton inquiry—are true.

“We have also had confirmed, after more than a year of categorical denials, that US rendition flights carrying suspects to be interrogated under torture had indeed landed on British soil, twice. In his apology to the Commons, Foreign Secretary David Miliband said the flights in 2002, which had landed at Diego Garcia, the British Indian Ocean Territory that is home to a US air base, had been mistakenly overlooked.”

But even while admitting to this “oversight,” Hyland continued, the government was taking steps to prevent far more damaging disclosures. “On February 28 the high court placed a gagging order on Ben Griffin, a former SAS soldier who had told how hundreds of Iraqis and Afghans captured by British and US Special Forces had been subject to rendition.” Before the gagging order, Griffin, who left the SAS in 2005, had stated that the use of British territory and airspace for rendition flights ‘pales into insignificance in light of the fact that it has been British soldiers detaining the victims of extraordinary rendition in the first place,’ and that he had ‘no doubt’ that ‘non-combatants I personally detained were handed over to the Americans and subsequently tortured.’”

This continuing campaign of disinformation was aimed at concealing the extent of the crimes committed by US and British imperialism in launching a preemptive war of aggression, Hyland said. Figures released in January by the British polling agency Opinion Research Business and its Iraqi research partner, the Independent Institute for Administration and Civil Society Studies, confirmed that more than one million Iraqi civilians have died as a result of the American-led invasion and occupation.

But there will be little reference to these horrifying statistics in the media, she noted, as the ruling elite seek to lull people into a false sense of security—claiming that violence is down, the “surge” is working and even that an end to the war is in sight with the last days of the Bush presidency and his possible replacement with a Democrat—either Barack Obama or Hillary Clinton.

“In reality, neither Obama nor Clinton is proposing the immediate

withdrawal of troops, nor more fundamentally can they offer an alternative to the aggressive military policy of the United States,” Hyland said. On February 25, the US military announced that the number of troops in Iraq following the “surge” begun last year will be some 10,000 more than pre-surge levels. What was claimed at the time as a temporary increase in US forces will in fact result in the indefinite presence of 140,000 US troops.

The US has refused to give any estimate of how long troops it will remain in Iraq. “As for Britain,” she continued, “late in February the *Observer* forecast that a ‘final all-out battle for Basra is seen as ‘inevitable’ as persistent violence looks set to keep British troops mired in southern Iraq longer than was expected.”

The newspaper noted that Iraqi security forces and Shia militia groups have been engaged in an “uneasy truce,” Hyland said. “Pressed for by Britain, this truce was secured on the basis that UK forces were moved to a base outside the city, giving Prime Minister Gordon Brown the possibility of announcing a troop reduction from 4,700 to 2,500 by spring.” But, citing Colonel Richard Iron, military adviser to Iraqi Commander General Mohan, the newspaper stated, “That timetable appears increasingly optimistic.” According to Iron, “There is a sense in the ISF [Iraqi Security Force] that confrontation is inevitable.”

“Neither Britain, nor the US can afford to simply quit Iraq,” Hyland explained. “Iron’s remarks were made as Michael Wareing, Brown’s business emissary in Iraq who heads the new Basra Development Commission, claimed that Western oil giants are readying to enter southern Iraq, which contains 70 percent of the country’s proven oil reserves. The Development Commission has organised an investors’ conference in Kuwait this month, and is to stage another event in London next month for European and US companies.”

To the extent that there has been any ebb in the conflict between Iraqi resistance groups and the occupying forces, she continued, this has been achieved by buying off substantial sections of the various militias, backed by a brutal counterinsurgency operation. Close to 80,000 mainly Sunni fighters are now on the US payroll.

This institutionalising of sectarian divisions is undermining Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s administration. In particular, there is growing conflict over the distribution and control of Iraq’s oil and gas resources, with many of the Shiite and Sunni groups making it clear that they would try to prevent any referendum on the status of the Kurdish-controlled area of Kirkuk, due to have been held by December 2007, until a new oil law was passed placing the province’s oil under Baghdad’s control.

The Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in the north has since used the constitution to legitimise 15 production-sharing agreements signed with at least 20 transnational energy companies for small oil projects in its territory, Hyland explained. If the KRG took over Kirkuk, it could claim the right to hand out contracts and control revenues from some of the country’s largest oilfields:

“It is in this context that the recent incursions by Turkey in the Kurdish-

controlled north must be understood. Over the last months, on the pretext of destroying the bases of the separatist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), Turkey has conducted repeated air strikes, bombing villages and leaving a reported 1,255 people so far displaced. Last month, Turkish troops crossed the border into the Zap region and were involved in bloody clashes.”

Citing the *World Socialist Web Site*, Hyland explained, “It is by no means accidental that the invasion was launched just days after the Kosovo declaration and the KRG’s announcement of an agreement with South Korea’s National Oil Corporation to develop oilfields in northern Iraq and a US\$10.5 billion contract with Korean Ssangyong Engineering and Construction for the rapid modernisation of the region’s infrastructure. Thousands of South Korean troops are still based around the Kurdish capital of Irbil. Turkey faces the possibility of major international players backing a declaration of independence by the KRG, using Kosovo as a precedent.”

Turkey’s recent military incursions were actively supported by the Bush administration, she continued.

“The US military is supplying intelligence on PKK locations and movements and has described Turkey’s actions as ones of legitimate ‘self defence.’

“The twists and turns in US policy towards the Kurdish parties are bound up with another mounting dilemma. In the initial years of the US occupation, the Kurdish parties were a crucial component of the Bush administration’s plans to transform Iraq into a client state and pursue its broader plans to dominate the Middle East. Now, Kurdish ambitions are becoming an obstacle to American interests.

“US policy is bound up with broader geopolitical considerations in the Middle East. The US alliance with Turkey, which is a member of the NATO alliance, is considered critical, both in terms of the supply routes for American troops in Iraq and for Washington’s strategic concerns in the Middle East, including possible military confrontation with the Iranian regime.

“However, Turkey is itself emerging as the major regional power actively pursuing its own interests and even conducting deals with Iran for joint gas ventures. Consequently, the US has sought to woo Ankara and isolate Iran by backing Turkish attacks in US-occupied Iraq and signalling its preparedness to sacrifice Kurdish interests in the region.”

In addition to the volatile situation regarding Iraq, Turkey and Iran, Hyland said, there is the deepening crisis within Afghanistan. Long pronounced the “winnable war,” recent months have seen an increase in the numbers of attacks by Taliban and guerrilla forces against NATO and its local allies. It is for this reason that the US has been seeking to bully the European powers—particularly Germany—into despatching more troops to Afghanistan in order that, in the memorable words of US Defense Secretary Robert Gates, they can take their fair share “of the fighting and the dying.”

According to Mike McConnell, America’s top intelligence chief, the situation is “deteriorating,” with Hamid Karzai’s government controlling just 30 percent of the country.

“The outburst of US military aggression, epitomised by Iraq, has not only destabilised the Middle East, but reignited all the unresolved historical questions of the past century,” Hyland went on.

“To claim that this is the result of a number of ‘mistaken’ policy choices by the Bush administration and its supporters in Britain is yet another attempt to chloroform public opinion as to the real processes at work.”

Hyland recalled how, speaking on March 29, 2003, just nine days after the outbreak of war, *World Socialist Web Site* chairman David North had explained to a meeting of the Socialist Equality Party in the US: “As in 1914 with the outbreak of World War I, and in 1939 with the outbreak of World War II, the eruption of war in 2003 arises out of deep-rooted contradictions in the world capitalist system. Understood in the broadest

historical context, the contradictions that have given rise to this war are, in their essence, the same as those which produced the previous world wars. Once again, war arises out of the underlying conflict between the essentially global character of economic development and the anachronistic character of the nation-state system.”

Economically weakened, faced with the emergence of new competitors such as China and Russia and a renewed battle for vital resources, the strategy of American imperialism, with the support of Britain, ‘consists,’ North explained, “of utilizing its massive military power to establish the unchallengeable global hegemony of the United States and completely subordinate to itself the resources of the world economy.” (See “Into the maelstrom: the crisis of American imperialism and the war against Iraq”)

“There can be no retreat from this struggle for global hegemony,” Hyland said. “There is no question that the presidential elections are bound up with arguments and divisions within the American elite as to the way forward. But the one issue on which they agree is that there can be no diminution in the striving of US imperialism to assert its interests. Rather the issue is how to more effectively direct its efforts to this end—one which focuses on the ‘real’ enemy.”

In this context, she noted the remarks by Republican presidential contender John McCain in a German newspaper in which he called for Russia to be thrown out of the G-8, and for the creation of a “league of democracies” under US leadership as an alternative to the United Nations.

Similarly, a recent report by the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) in London, based on discussions with senior military figures and representatives of the establishment, noted that, notwithstanding the government’s declared faith in such supranational institutions as the United Nations, NATO and the European Union, all are very much weakened. Calling for the building of new alliances, it stressed that “coalitions of the willing are the only lasting kind; nations do not have permanent friends, only permanent interests.” It highlighted the “English-speaking world” as Britain’s “main diplomatic resource.”

“It is undoubtedly the case that the multilateral organisations established at the end of the Second World War are in terminal decline,” Hyland said. “However, this is not the result of ‘institutional’ failures but rather the growth of inter-imperialist antagonisms.”

This had been underscored by the decision to bypass the UN Security Council over Kosovo’s recent declaration of independence.

“During the mass international protests against the Iraq war in 2003, the various radical protest groups, such as the Socialist Workers Party in Britain, argued that the invasion and occupation could be prevented by appeals to the UN and the European Union to intervene and call the US into line.

“Not only was that perspective an abject failure, but now the European Union has acted as the primary political mechanism for the machinations of the Great Powers. It is the EU that gave its stamp of approval to Kosovan independence. And if US actions in Iraq have gravely destabilised the Middle East, the consequences of the European powers bequeathing political legitimacy on Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence from Serbia will have major repercussions for the whole of Europe and indeed the world.”

While the US had pushed for the EU declaration, German, British and French support for this latest trampling of international law was not simply the result of kowtowing to US dictates: “There is a growing fear within the major European powers that the evident weakness of the US, and the series of setbacks it has suffered in Iraq and Afghanistan, will have grave implications for them. How is the European Union—currently without any significant military forces—to counter the rising threat of China and Russia? This is what determines the growing rapprochement between so-called Old Europe and the US in the years since the Iraq invasion.”

In conclusion, Hyland stated that there is “no question that millions of

people across the world are bitterly hostile to the growth of imperialist militarism and neo-colonialism. The movement of some 10 million people, in cities and towns across the globe in February 2003, showed the potential for an international movement against war. But the potential of this movement was hamstrung and fatally compromised by the political conceptions which dominated it—that war could be prevented simply by protests and appeals to reason directed towards one or another major power to act as an ‘honest broker.’”

The drive to war, Hyland said, is not the result of a mistaken policy, “a kind of wild excess on the part of an otherwise rational system. It is the inevitable product of a society in which all social needs are subordinated to the accumulation of corporate profit and the personal wealth of an elite.

“The struggle against war is today—as it was in World War One and World War Two—an international class question. The fight against war must be waged on the basis of an international socialist strategy, and that means constructing a political party—a truly world party—which unifies workers and youth across the globe in the fight for the revolutionary reorganization of global economic life on the basis of social need.”



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