Iraq: Handover in devastated Anbar hailed as a victory

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6 September 2008

The ceremony held last Monday to formally transfer Anbar province to Iraqi government forces is being held up by the most vociferous defenders of the Iraq war as the crowning glory of the Bush administration's "surge." The region of Iraq where resistance to the occupation was once the greatest is now considered so firmly under control that US troops can be withdrawn to heavily fortified bases on the outskirts of the major cities and towns.

The *Wall Street Journal* editorial of September 2 was typical of the pro-war reaction. After first lauding Bush for having "overruled the defeatists and ordered a renewed US commitment to Iraq", the newspaper declared: "The Anbar handover is above all a tribute to the hundreds of Americans who have fought and died in places like Fallujah, Ramadi and Hit over these last five years.... What mattered is that our troops, and our country, had the determination to fight to an ultimate victory."

The "ultimate victory" sought by the *Wall Street Journal*—and for which hundreds of American soldiers were sacrificed—is the reduction of Iraq to the status of an American puppet state. It speaks for a financial and corporate oligarchy that has aspired to place the oil and gas resources of the Middle East under its domination since the 1970s and was prepared to countenance any crime to achieve this end.

The newspaper's gloating stands in stark contrast to the sentiments of the millions of American workers and youth who have consistently opposed the occupation of Iraq. The 2003 invasion was an illegal war of aggression carried out on the false pretext that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction and was aiding Al Qaeda. The people of Anbar, and the soldiers who were sent there to fight, have paid a tremendous price.

When the war began, Anbar had a predominantly Sunni Arab population of some 1.5 million. The province, the largest in Iraq, occupies the entire western portion of the country, bordering Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Syria. It is dissected from the north-west to the south-east by the Euphrates River, and the fertile land of the river valley was once dotted with farms, orchards, villages and towns.

The US military occupied the major cities of Anbar during April 2003 and soon confronted the reality that the population overwhelmingly opposed their presence. In Fallujah, the second-largest city, students demonstrated on April 28 to demand that American troops who had established a command post in their school get out. Paratroopers of the 82nd Airborne opened fire on the unarmed protestors, killing 17 and wounding more the 70 others.

This act set the stage for years of bloody counter-insurgency operations in Anbar that have left much of the province in ruins and produced some of the worst atrocities of the occupation.

The American siege of Fallujah led to the destruction of the city between April and November 2004. By the time the battle for Fallujah ended, 36,000 of the city's 50,000 residential homes were destroyed or damaged, along with 65 schools and 60 mosques. Thousands died and many among the pre-war population of 300,000 became refugees. The final assault involved the deliberate US bombing of hospitals and ambulances, the use of internationally-banned white phosphorous rounds on residential areas and the execution of wounded Iraqi prisoners.

The entire central district of Ramadi, the provincial capital of Anbar, suffered a similar fate. Much of the area was laid waste during 2005 and 2006 in an attempt to dislodge anti-occupation guerillas. Towns such as Al Qaim, Hit and Haditha were devastated by major US offensives. Haditha will be particularly remembered as the scene of an indiscriminate massacre of Iraqi civilians on November 19, 2005, in which 15 civilians were gunned down in their homes in murderous retaliation for a

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roadside bombing that killed a US marine.

The Iraqi civilian death toll in Anbar, while unknown, most likely exceeds 100,000. US casualties in the province between March 2003 and this week's handover stood at 1,305 dead and as many as 10,000 wounded—not counting the thousands of troops who served in the province and returned home with varying degrees of psychological trauma.

Despite the years of killing and dying, the surge of additional US forces to the province in early 2007 played a relatively minor role in the ebb of fighting that took place throughout last year. The main factor was the formation of the "Awakening Council"—a movement of Anbar tribal leaders against radical Islamist tendencies in the anti-occupation insurgency.

The self-styled Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), which adhered to the Wahhabist interpretation of Sunni Islam prevalent in neighbouring Saudi Arabia and shared by Al Qaeda, developed a sizeable base of support in Anbar by early 2006. Throughout the year, a power struggle for control of the insurgency ensured, with the Wahhabists attempting to use religious edicts and violence to supplant the traditional authority of tribal sheiks.

In September 2006, 40 tribes and sub-tribes in Anbar declared a blood feud against the ISI over the killing of a number of prominent sheiks. They sought out and received the assistance of US commanders in the province who, at the time, assessed that they had effectively lost control of the province.

The "Awakening" saw thousands of tribal loyalists—many of them former insurgents—enlist in the Anbar police or local Iraqi army units. US-paid tribal militias, which were initially known as Emergency Response Units, worked alongside them. Islamist radicals were hunted down and slaughtered in their hundreds over the following months.

Throughout 2007, the tribes, backed by the US military, imposed their control over virtually the entire province. So far this year there have only been 16 US combat fatalities reported in Anbar—less than most monthly totals in 2005 and 2006. US commanders have strongly hinted that marine units among the 26,000 troops in western Iraq will soon be made available for redeployment to Afghanistan.

The much lauded stability, however, rests on fragile foundations. A significant proportion of the Iraqi army units in Anbar and the 28,000-strong provincial police are in reality a thinly-disguised tribal force. The Awakening movement has no loyalty to either the Shiite-dominated government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in Baghdad or to the current provincial government in Anbar, which is currently controlled by a rival of the tribes, the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP).

The IIP is a Sunni party that collaborated with the US occupation at a time when most of the province was supporting the insurgency. Just 2 percent of the population voted in the 2005 provincial election in which the IIP was elevated into power.

The sheiks that sponsored the Awakening aim to throw the IIP out in the next provincial elections and use the governorship to cement their hold in Anbar. Among the greatest prizes is the large Akkas gas field, which has estimated reserves of up to seven trillion cubic feet. Exploration is also taking place to determine whether the province sits above substantial untapped oil fields.

The factional rivalries in Anbar—essentially a conflict within the Sunni establishment over who will act as local agents for the US and other transnational companies lining up to exploit Iraq's resources—could easily spill over into open fighting. The IIP holds ministries in Maliki's government and has been seeking Baghdad's assistance to wrest control of the security forces in Anbar from the sheiks. Last week, the Interior Ministry approved the sacking of the Anbar police commander, a tribal loyalist, and his replacement with an IIP sympathiser. In protest, few of the tribal leaders attended the handover ceremony on Monday.

One sheik, Mohammad Mahmood al Natah, told *Time* magazine: "If the Islamic Party continues to pressure the government to remove Awakening members from the security forces, then there is the high likelihood that Anbar will return to violence." In the event of a new security meltdown, American troops will again find themselves in the frontline of a guerilla war in Anbar, dying for Wall Street's ambitions.

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