

Bush's "victory" visit to Iraq meets with contempt and protest

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After years of the Bush administration's attempts to control the images of the Iraq war, an Iraqi journalist turned the tables Sunday through an act of protest that drew broad popular support throughout the Arab world.

From the staged toppling of Saddam Hussein's statue in Baghdad's Firdos Square to the landing of the US president in a flight suit for his "mission accomplished" speech on the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln, to the ban on media photographs of coffins being offloaded at Dover Air Force Base, the Bush administration has sought relentlessly to manufacture and control the images from the US war in Iraq.

The aim has always been to mask the predatory and criminal nature of this war and promote the phony pretexts upon which it was launched and the false propaganda about its supposed aims: democracy and liberation, rather than oil and US global hegemony.

To the extent that this effort enjoyed partial and temporary success, it was due in large measure to the active assistance of the corporate-controlled media. It was none other than Bush's former press secretary Scott McClellan who described the US media as "complicit enablers" in "spreading distortions, half-truths, and occasionally outright lies." (See "Ex-Bush spokesman: White House fed war propaganda to a 'complicit' media").

Now, a member of the Iraqi media has turned the tables, providing through a courageous act of protest an image that tells an essential truth about the US war of aggression. It is an image that will endure.

The journalist was Muntadhar al-Zaidi, the senior correspondent for the al Baghdadia TV station. In uncontrollable fury, he threw first one of his shoes and then the other at the head of President George W. Bush during a Sunday press conference in Baghdad.

As he carried out this act, a gesture of utmost contempt in Iraqi culture, al-Zaidi shouted in Arabic, "This is a goodbye kiss from the Iraqi people, dog. This is from the widows, the orphans, and those who were killed in Iraq."

Many of those who knew the 28-year-old reporter said that they believed his actions were a spontaneous eruption of fury over the effects of the more than six years of US war and occupation in his country. They have reported that al-Zaidi was deeply affected by covering the US bombardment of Sadr City, the teeming Shia slum neighborhood of Baghdad in which many civilians were killed. He also was at one point detained without cause by US occupation forces.

The protest came immediately after Bush concluded his remarks at a press conference with Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki called on the occasion of the two men signing a Status of Forces agreement (SOFA) that is supposed to end in the withdrawal of all US military forces by 2011 as well as a "Strategic Framework Agreement" that, in Bush's words, "formalizes 'a relationship of friendship and cooperation' between our two countries in the economic, diplomatic, cultural, and security fields."

The signing was entirely for propaganda purposes, as US Ambassador Ryan Crocker had already initialed the documents on Washington's behalf last month. The event was staged as one more attempt by the administration in its closing days to cast its disastrous war in Iraq as a "success" and the country as "secure."

As with such previous visits, however, Bush was compelled to sneak into Iraq with no prior announcements and was able to appear in only heavily fortified areas and US bases. At the press conference where the incident took place, reporters were subjected to multiple searches by both US and Iraqi security.

Bush claimed in his remarks that the agreements were setting the stage for the "future of what we've been fighting for...a strong and capable democratic Iraq that will be a force of freedom and a force for peace in the heart of the Middle East." He continued, however, by adding that "the war is not over."

After suited Iraqi security guards wrestled al-Zaidi to the floor and dragged him out of the press conference, Bush and Maliki continued speaking, over the sounds of the reporter being brutally beaten in the next room.

As the *New York Times* reported, "They kicked him and beat him until 'he was crying like a woman,' said Mohammed Taher, a reporter for Afaq, a television station owned by the Dawa Party, which is led by Mr. Maliki."

Both Bush and sections of the American media tried to spin the incident by casting it as a demonstration of Iraq's new-found "freedom" and commenting that anyone carrying out a similar protest under Saddam Hussein would have been put to death.

Yet, the whereabouts and conditions of al-Zaidi remain unknown. The Iraqi regime issued a statement that it was holding him for investigation and reported that it was trying to determine whether someone paid him to throw his shoes.

Al-Zaidi's Al-Baghdadia television channel, which broadcasts from Cairo, issued a statement demanding his immediate release.

"Al-Baghdadia television demands that the Iraqi authorities immediately release their stringer Muntadhar al-Zaidi, in line with

the democracy and freedom of expression that the American authorities promised the Iraqi people," said the statement.

It continued, "Any action taken against Muntathar will remind us of the actions and behaviors taken by the reign of the dictator and the violence, the random arrests, the mass graves and confiscations of freedom from the people."

"We fear for his safety," said Muzhir al-Khafaji, the channel's programming director. The station suspended its regular schedule, broadcasting continuous appeals for his release and messages of support together with footage of devastation wrought by the US war and music denouncing it.

After the incident, Bush commented, "I don't know what the guy's cause is."

If the US president genuinely remained clueless, the same could not be said for people all over Iraq, throughout the Arab world and indeed around the globe.

The "cause" is an unprovoked war that has cost more than a million Iraqi lives, left 2 million Iraqis wounded, turned 4 million into exiles or internal refugees and laid waste to the fabric of an entire society.

As al-Zaida's brother Dhirgham explained to the media, the reporter—who signed off his broadcasts with "reporting from occupied Baghdad"—hated what the US war had done to his country, both in terms of the US military presence and in the rise of reactionary Shia clericalist forces aligned with Iran. "He hates the American material occupation as much as he hates the Iranian moral occupation," said Dhirgham.

In Iraq itself, thousands took to the streets of Basra City, many of them waving shoes and carrying signs demanding al-Zaidi's release. The demonstration, in which American flags were burned, was as much a celebration of the reporter's actions as a protest over his treatment at the hands of the Maliki regime.

Similar protests were reported in Basra in the south and in Najaf, where protesters, apparently inspired by the report from Baghdad, pelted a passing American military patrol with shoes.

Newspapers in most Arab countries led with the protest against Bush and television stations replayed tape of the reporter hurling his shoes at the US president over and over again.

In press interviews, Iraqis and people throughout the region voiced their support for the reporter.

"I am happy for what happened because that will reflect how we do not like Bush," said Mohamed al-Hili, a 35-year-old policeman. "And our government has a different attitude and belief than ours. And I'd like to add that Mr. Muntader is a hero and he must be our president or at least P.M. [prime minister]. We need to replace al-Maliki with the real Iraqi—Mr. Muntader."

"I swear by God that all Iraqis with their different nationalities are glad about this act," said 45-year-old Yaareb Yousif Matti, a teacher from the northern city of Mosul.

In Nablus, on the Palestinian West Bank, Wafa Khayat, a 48-year-old doctor, called al-Zaidi's action "a message to Bush and all the US policy makers that they have to stop killing and humiliating people."

And in Jordan, businessman Samer Tabalat, 42, hailed the reporter as "the man.... He did what Arab leaders failed to do."

Even as the controversy swirled over the shoe-throwing, there

were strong indications that the agreements that Bush came to sign will not bring about the promised withdrawal of American troops and have set the stage for the protracted continuation of the US occupation and the formalization of the Baghdad regime's status as a US client state. (See "Security agreements mean Iraq occupation will continue to 2012 and beyond")

Speaking on Saturday, the US military commander in Iraq, General Ray Odierno, said that although the US-Iraqi SOFA sets a June 30 deadline for the withdrawal of all US troops from Iraqi cities, he anticipates them remaining well past that date.

"It's important that we maintain enough presence here that we can help them get through this year of transition," said Odierno. "We don't want to take a step backward, because we've made so much progress here."

American troops would remain in joint military bases set up in Iraqi cities fulfilling "training and support" roles, Odierno indicated.

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's office issued a statement in response, acknowledging that provisions of the agreement can be renegotiated: "We can change the date or articles if that is necessary." But he declared that Odierno's predictions about US forces remaining in the cities "premature."

The exchange followed last week's controversy over remarks made by Iraqi government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh in Washington, in which he said that the regime in Baghdad would be willing to extend the 2011 deadline for a full US military withdrawal and predicted that Iraqi security forces would not be able to control the country for another decade.

In response, Maliki issued his own written statement claiming that Dabbagh was expressing "his personal point of view and that it does not represent the opinion of the Iraqi government."

The parliamentary bloc loyal to Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadar, which opposed the SOFA, said that the statements exposed the reality behind the claims made by both Washington and the Maliki regime.

"This confirmed our view that US forces will never withdraw from the cities next summer, and they will never leave Iraq by the end of 2011," Ahmed al-Masoudi, a spokesman for the Sadr bloc, told the *Washington Post*. "Iraqis will discover that the government has bamboozled them about this agreement."

The continuation of the US occupation is entirely in line with the policy of the incoming administration of President-elect Barack Obama, who has clarified in recent weeks his intention to maintain a "residual force" in Iraq consisting of tens of thousands of US troops.



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