

Iraq: the forgotten war

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Not so long ago, the term “the forgotten war” was being used to describe American lack of interest in its military occupation of Afghanistan. US domination of that country was assumed to be an accomplished fact. Now the same label could be applied to Iraq—and for the same reason.

To a large extent, the American ruling elite has been convinced by its own propaganda. From the Obama administration to the Republican opposition and the mass media, there is a consensus that the US troop surge to Iraq in 2007 and 2008 led to “victory”. The policies of General David Petraeus are credited with largely ending the Sunni Arab-based insurgency, crushing the anti-occupation Shiite Madhi Army militia and creating a stable “democracy” in the form of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s government.

The focus now is on the Obama administration’s reorientation to Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia, which took a back seat under Bush. The Iraq war has largely vanished from the nightly television news and the newspaper front pages. It is as though the American establishment is attempting to banish from popular consciousness any memory of its war crimes against the Iraqi people.

The current relative stability was accomplished by more than five years of bloody repression of Iraqi opposition to the US invasion—the most violent being the surge years. As many as 1.2 million Iraqis lost their lives, as well as over 4,500 American and other occupying troops. The legacy of US occupation is a shattered and traumatised society, wracked by communal divisions and incapable of satisfying even the most elementary social needs of the population.

Ultimately, the main factor in curbing the anti-occupation insurgency was not US military operations but the de-facto partition of the country along sectarian and ethnic lines. In the country’s north, Kurdish nationalists have consolidated an autonomous statelet. In the areas that have a majority Sunni population and were the centres of the resistance, militia commanders and tribal chiefs were elevated to power, in exchange for their agreement to end the fighting. The Shiite fundamentalist parties that dominate Maliki’s government essentially control only Baghdad and the southern provinces.

The subservience of the rival factions to US imperialism is matched only by their hostility and antagonism toward each other. Open warfare is being delayed by the ongoing deployment of 140,000 American troops in the country.

One of the sharpest points of tension is the continuing insistence of the autonomous Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) that it gain control over the northern oil-rich province of Kirkuk and parts of two other provinces. Maliki is attempting to block any expansion of Kurdish nationalist power by seeking to prevent referenda being held in the disputed areas that would most likely see the majority Kurdish population vote to join the KRG.

A predominantly Arab division of the Iraqi army has been deployed around Kirkuk city and has threatened to force Kurdish *peshmerga* militiamen to leave the area. The threats coincide with the Iraqi oil ministry parceling out contracts to develop eight new oil and gas fields in Kirkuk, specifically excluding companies that have entered into commercial relations with the KRG in defiance of the central government.

The US military commander, General Ray Odierno, raised his concerns over Arab-Kurdish tensions in the British *Times* on April 7: “Lines seem to be hardening. These problems need to be solved diplomatically... They should not be solved by violence so that is what we work very carefully to make sure occurs.” US troop numbers in Kirkuk have been boosted from 900 to over 3,500. They could find themselves in the middle of a civil war or the target of a Kurdish-based insurgency if KRG ambitions are thwarted.

Shiite-Sunni tensions are also rising. During the surge, under conditions of intense US operations and savage Shiite-Sunni sectarian violence, tens of thousands of Sunni insurgents entered into agreements with the US military to end their resistance. Their guerilla cells were transformed into locally-based, US-paid militias known as Awakening Councils. In return, American commanders prevented the government security forces from entering Sunni districts, stemming the frenzy of killings.

This month, responsibility for paying the Awakening Councils was transferred to the Maliki government, which is insisting that the Sunni militias disband and disarm within a year. Awakening leaders have expressed fears that Sunni communities will once again be at the mercy of Shiite death squads. Moreover, they are increasingly suspicious that the government will not honour promises to give the militiamen alternate employment in the security forces or public service. In response to a major shortfall in the Iraqi budget, due to the slump in oil prices, government departments have begun announcing recruitment freezes or job cuts.

The distrust and discontent among the ranks of the Awakening could reignite large scale resistance. Already, Odierno has indicated that US troops will not be withdrawing from the cities of Mosul and Baqubah in June due to the level of insurgent activity.

Even more explosive are the pent-up grievances of the Iraqi working class and urban poor—Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish alike. It is taken for granted in Washington and by the various factions of the Iraqi ruling elite that the global economic crisis means there are no resources to rebuild infrastructure, provide jobs to the

unemployed or lift people out of poverty and deprivation. Social struggles against the conditions facing the mass of the population are inevitable.

However much the Obama administration would like to shift priorities, the war in Iraq continues. So far this month, five troops have been killed in Mosul, bombings have rocked Kirkuk and a counter-insurgency operation has been launched in Fallujah. Yesterday Baghdad’s Green Zone was mortared for the first time in three months. To protect its strategic interests in Iraq and the region, the US will be compelled to continue its criminal occupation that will require the indefinite presence of tens of thousands of American troops.

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