

The reality behind the US “success” in Iraq

James Cogan
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The massive explosions that tore apart the Justice Ministry and provincial government headquarters in central Baghdad on Sunday, killing over 140 people and wounding at least 520, are a particularly bloody reminder of the sectarian, ethnic and political conflicts that have been generated in Iraq by six-and-a-half years of US occupation.

The weekend bombings were the second major attack on government office complexes in two months. On August 19, car bombs exploded outside the Finance Ministry and Foreign Ministry, killing 102 and wounding over 600. On both occasions, the bombers were able to drive explosive-laden vehicles through a series of security checkpoints.

On average, between 10 and 15 bombings, suicide bombings or insurgent attacks take place each day in Iraq against government officials or security forces. In some cases, the bombings indiscriminately target civilians of a particular ethnic or sectarian background. Less spectacular than Sunday’s bombing, they are barely reported by the media.

Whenever an opportunity arises, insurgents strike at the 120,000 American troops still in Iraq. US forces are now occupying the country from heavily guarded bases outside the urban centres.

The puppet government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has blamed the high-profile bombings on loyalists of the former Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein. The possibility cannot be ruled out. Significant sections of the predominantly Sunni Arab Baathist establishment have lost virtually everything they once had in terms of property, position and privilege to the Shiite and Kurdish factions who collaborated with the US invasion.

Numerous Iraqis, of varying political and religious persuasions, have ample grievances to volunteer for attacks against the regime created by the US occupation. Over one million people have lost their lives since 2003, including hundreds of thousands directly killed by US forces. Tens of

thousands of others have suffered arbitrary detention and appalling abuse in American and Iraqi government prison camps. Over four million people have been forced from their homes or been compelled to flee the country altogether. Iraqi hatred for the occupation has not abated.

The attacks on the government ministries have coincided with increasingly bitter feuding among the pro-occupation Iraqi factions in the lead-up to the elections that constitutionally must take place by January 31, 2010. Washington is putting enormous pressure on Maliki to reverse a pledge to hold a popular referendum at the same time as the election on the status of forces agreement reached between his government and the US. American commentators openly acknowledge that such a referendum will likely produce a majority vote against the agreement, spearheaded by Iraqis who want to see an immediate withdrawal of American military forces.

Maliki’s Da’wa Party, most likely with behind-the-scenes encouragement from the Obama administration, has left the Shiite fundamentalist alliance dominated by the Iranian-linked Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and will contest the election against it. The ISCI hierarchy, which is being cynically demonised by the no less fundamentalist Maliki as “sectarian” and “anti-democratic,” is threatened with losing many of the lucrative positions it currently holds in the Iraqi state if Da’wa’s new “nationalist” alliance wins an outright majority. Alternatively, Maliki may be thrown out of office if his perspective of sidelining ISCI fails.

Maliki’s government has also created a tense stand-off with Kurdish nationalist forces by refusing to honour the promises made to them in 2003 that they would gain control of the oil-rich city of Kirkuk and other areas of northern Iraq in exchange for actively supporting the US invasion. The Kurds are insisting that any election include a vote in Kirkuk, in the face of furious opposition from ethnic Arab and Turkomen factions in the northern areas claimed by the Kurdish autonomous region. There have been several occasions this year when government troops and Kurdish

military units have nearly opened fire on each other.

The extent of the tensions over how positions of power and privilege will be divided between Sunni and Shiite elites, between rival Shiite groupings and between the Kurdish region and the Baghdad government is such that no agreement has been reached in the Iraqi parliament on how the election will even be conducted. Any election campaign will almost certainly witness significant violence and fraud and could trigger open civil warfare.

The situation is in stark contrast to the repeated claims in the US establishment that the Bush administration's military "surge" was a success and that Iraq is now on a path to stability. A graphic example of the self-delusion and deliberate deception that prevail was published on Sunday by *New York Times* columnist and proponent of the Iraq invasion, Thomas Friedman.

Friedman day-dreamed of Barack Obama flying into Baghdad in 2012 to "take credit for helping Iraq achieve a decent—albeit hugely costly—end to the war," if only the January election goes ahead trouble-free and results in a government committed to "real multi-sectarian democracy."

What is the reality? Throughout the occupation, divide-and-rule tactics, including the bribing of the most venal and corrupt ethno-sectarian forces, have been the means by which Iraqi resistance has been broken up and drowned in blood.

In 2003, the Bush administration consolidated the autonomous Kurdish statelet in the north and elevated Shiite fundamentalists into control of the Baghdad government in order to gain local collaborators. During the surge, Sunni insurgent commanders were handed control of various districts of the country, along with tens of millions of dollars, in order to cease attacks on American troops and inform on those who continued to resist. In Shiite areas, leaders of cleric Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army also agreed to be bought off and assisted in the destruction of insurgent elements.

The *Wall Street Journal* bluntly described the character of the surge on October 26: "Conventional US forces assigned to individual Iraqi neighborhoods and villages ultimately managed to develop detailed information about local insurgent leaders, financiers and fighters. That information was then given to the commando units—like the Navy Seals and the Army's Delta Force—who eliminated hundreds of individual Shiite and Sunni militants."

The operations of the US death squads in Iraq were directed by Gen. Stanley McChrystal, whom Obama appointed to oversee a "surge" and similar agenda of mass killing in Afghanistan.

No "multi-sectarian democracy" is going to emerge from bourgeois elements who have aided, for their own material gain and self-interest, a bloodbath against the Iraqi people. If anything, their promotion of ethno-sectarian divisions will be exacerbated by the social nightmare facing the population.

Once a relatively developed society, Iraq has been shattered and impoverished. At least 50 percent of the workforce does not have regular employment. Only half the population has access to safe drinking water. In the poor neighborhoods of Baghdad and other cities, people live amidst raw sewerage in the street with access to barely 10 hours of electricity per day. According to the United Nations, 60 percent of Iraqis inhabit housing that requires "major rehabilitation" due to years of warfare.

A political eruption against these conditions is simmering—as US imperialism and none of its local collaborators have the means or intention to redress them in the slightest. That fact will be highlighted in an election in which nothing but demagogic and false promises will be made.

Meanwhile, Maliki traveled to Washington last week to participate in an "investors' conference" where the main order of business was offering up the country's vast oil reserves for sale to foreign companies for exploitation and profit.

Given the underlying tensions and volatility in Iraq, and the disaster unfolding in Afghanistan, no serious observer can exclude the possibility that the weekend bombings are part of an effort by the most pro-US elements in Iraq to manufacture a "security crisis" that could be used to justify the elections being postponed or called off altogether.

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