

The reality of the Iraq War

Joseph Kishore
21 December 2011

US President Barack Obama staged a ceremony Tuesday morning at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland to mark the end of the Iraq War and the return of the top US commander in Iraq, General Lloyd Austin. With the president nodding his agreement, Austin declared, "What our troops achieved in Iraq over the course of nearly nine years is truly remarkable. Together with our coalition partners and corps of dedicated civilians, they removed a brutal dictator and gave the Iraqi people their freedom."

Field Marshal Göring could not have put it better in speaking of the "liberation" of Poland.

The departure of the last "combat" troops from Iraq by no means marks an end to the US intervention in the country. It does, however, offer an opportunity to take the measure of one of the greatest crimes of the modern period. Whatever the sickening and hypocritical invocations of "success" and "freedom," the war and occupation have been a catastrophe for the people of Iraq and a tragedy for the people of the United States.

Statistics give some sense of the scale of the destruction inflicted by the American military:

- More than one million Iraqis were killed as a result of the invasion and occupation, according to scientific estimates carried out in 2007. The United Nations estimated in 2008 that 4.7 million people, or about 16 percent of the population, were turned into refugees.

- The infrastructure of the country, including the electrical system, was devastated. According to the United Nations *State of the World's Cities, 2010-2011* report, the percentage of the Iraqi urban population living in slums, defined as lacking access to basic necessities such as sanitation and water, increased from below 20 percent in 2003 to 53 percent in 2010.

- Real unemployment is on the order of 50 percent and inflation is over 50 percent. There has been a mass exodus of doctors and other professionals (estimated at 40 percent of those in the country prior to the war), and

the education system lies in ruins.

- Iraq has experienced a staggering growth of infant and child mortality. A 2007 report estimated that 28 percent of children suffered from chronic malnutrition. An Iraqi government agency reported that 35 percent of Iraqi children in 2007 (about 5 million children) were orphans. An entire generation has seen their parents killed or disappeared.

- More than 4,500 US soldiers were killed during the war and occupation and more than 30,000 injured. This does not include the tens of thousands leaving Iraq with serious psychological trauma.

- In terms of resources, the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan are estimated to have cost some \$4 trillion, including direct expenses and the long-term impact on health and economic growth. Hundreds of billions have been funneled to defense contractors and profiteers, and at least \$16 billion has simply been lost or stolen.

The war in Iraq was a criminal enterprise in the fullest sense of the word. It was sold on the basis of lies brazenly told to an international audience about "weapons of mass destruction." It was an aggressive war, launched without the slightest provocation and in the face of mass opposition in the United States and around the world. It was an exercise in international banditry, aimed at seizing control of one of the most oil-rich countries in the world for the benefit of US oil companies, while bolstering the position of the United States in the Middle East and increasing its leverage against its great power rivals.

All the atrocities for which the Iraq War will be remembered flowed from the imperialist character of the war: the mass imprisonment and torture of Iraqis at Abu Ghraib and other prisons; the leveling of Fallujah; the massacre of 24 civilians at Haditha; the rape and murder of a 14-year old girl and massacre of her family in Mahmudiyah; the routine killings at checkpoints,

during nighttime raids, and by bombs and missiles from jets and helicopter gunships.

Iraq's terrible encounter with American imperialism is far from over. The United States embassy in Iraq, the largest in the world, houses 15,000 people. CIA officials and private mercenaries—who played a major role in the occupation—will remain in the country. Tens of thousands of military troops are still in the region, ready to be deployed if needed.

Nearly nine years after the initial invasion, Iraq is ruled by an unstable and increasingly authoritarian regime and is rife with factional struggles that threaten to erupt in open civil war.

The war has left its mark on American society as well, and not only in the tens of thousands killed and injured and the trillions of dollars wasted. The war has played no small part in the growing power of the military over domestic political life and the development of a military-police apparatus that poses a mortal danger to the democratic rights of the American people.

While the war was launched and carried out by the Bush administration, the central role in frustrating and diverting opposition was played by the Democratic Party and its "left" supporters. On the eve of the invasion, the US saw the largest antiwar protests since the Vietnam War, with hundreds of thousands of Americans joining millions around the world to oppose the imminent atrocity.

Repeated attempts by the American people to put an end to the war were blocked by the Democratic Party, culminating in the election of Obama in 2008, whose victory was due in no small part to mass antiwar sentiment to which candidate Obama cynically appealed.

The official "antiwar" groups, having undermined organized opposition to the war by channeling it behind the election campaigns of the Democrats in 2004 and 2006, seized on the victory of Obama to wind up their protests. Far from representing a break from the policy of Bush, however, the Obama administration has continued it in all essentials. Not only did Obama maintain the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, he expanded the Afghan war into Pakistan and launched a new war in another oil-rich country, Libya.

The same organizations that proclaimed their opposition to the Iraq war supported the invasion of

Libya. These middle-class organizations and publications such as the *Nation* magazine seized on the election of Obama to make their peace with imperialism.

The withdrawal of combat troops from Iraq is a prelude to new and even more bloody wars. The capitalist crisis is entering a new phase, bringing with it growing tensions between the major powers. There are sections of the ruling class in the United States who saw the occupation as an ill-advised adventure that diverted resources and attention from more important threats—regional powers such as Iran and rising world powers such as China.

The American ruling class will act with just as much ruthlessness in attacking the jobs and social programs of workers at home as it does in asserting its interests internationally.

The immense reservoir of anti-war sentiment in the United States must again find expression as part of a social and political movement of the working class against the capitalist system.

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