

Future of Post-war Iraq Divides Bush Administration

By Jim Lobe | February 18, 2003

In the aftermath of millions on the streets worldwide opposing a rush to war by the Bush administration, U.S. officials remain at war among themselves over the shape of a post-war Iraq. While finishing touches are being put on war plans that could involve as many as 250,000 U.S. troops, neoconservatives and realists within the administration are battling over the future of a post-invasion Iraq.

Neoconservative forces hoping for a thoroughgoing de-Baathisation of Baghdad and the creation of a new democratic state along the lines of a post-World War II West Germany or Japan are increasingly worried that the administration will settle for the removal of only the top layer of President Saddam Hussein's regime.

"It is very difficult for me to conceive of democratic institutions being established in Iraq with the Baathist power structure mostly intact," said Randy Scheunemann, executive director of the Committee for the Liberation of Iraq (CLI), a group created last November that includes, among other influential foreign policy players, Defense Policy Board chairman Richard Perle and former Secretary of State George Shultz. "It's like taking out Hitler and (Gestapo Commander Heinrich) Himmler (in Nazi Germany) and leaving almost everyone else in place," he added.

The same forces are also angry about the latest consultations of Bush's special envoy to the Iraqi opposition, Zalmay Khalilzad, who, they say, appears inclined to exclude the exiled Iraqi National Congress (INC) from a leading role in a transitional administration. It was the INC that nominated as many as 3,000 volunteers who are now being trained to act as military police, interpreters, spotters, and guides for U.S. forces at a military base in Hungary. INC leader Ahmed Chalabi went to northern Kurdistan late last month, reportedly in hopes of preparing a provisional administration that could assume power in territory taken by U.S. forces as they made their way to Baghdad.

Khalilzad met with INC and other opposition leaders in Sulaymaniyah in U.S.- and British-protected northern Iraq in early February and informed them of plans to install a U.S. military governor in Baghdad for up to a year to oversee the transition with the help an appointed "consultative council" and a judicial committee that would draft a new constitution.

INC sources briefed by Khalilzad also told the *Washington Post* that the U.S. planned to remove only the top one or two Baathist officials in each government ministry, rather than to attempt a much more sweeping purge of the structure that has ruled Iraq for more than a quarter century.

"Power is being handed essentially on a platter to the second echelon of the Baath Party and the Iraqi officer corps," Kanan Makiya, an influential INC associate who met with Khalilzad and recently took part in a meeting with Bush himself at the White House, told the *Post*.

Makiya and other INC sources said Khalilzad appeared to be favoring the interests of neighboring states, particularly Saudi Arabia and, to a lesser extent, Kuwait, that have expressed strong concerns about the implications of a major purge of the existing governmental and military apparatus on Iraq's stability, as well as that of the entire region.

"They have come to the arrogant conclusion: 'Why piss around with the opposition? Why not do this in a way the Arab regimes will be much happier with?'" Makiya told Canada's *Globe and Mail* after the meeting.



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Saudi Arabia is particularly concerned about the rise of a Shiite-dominated government (INC leader Chalabi is Shia). This is not only because it could enhance Iran's influence in the Gulf, but also because Shiites in Saudi Arabia have suffered a history of discrimination and repression and may well be emboldened by a sympathetic government in Baghdad.

A similar concern about the regional implications of Saddam Hussein's removal prompted severe warnings by Khalilzad to Kurdish opposition groups over the weekend against any resistance to a Turkish intervention in northern Kurdistan once U.S. troops invade.

Ankara, which is believed to have already about 2,000 troops in the region, is worried that the Kurds will be tempted by the U.S. invasion to quickly seize Kirkuk or Mosul, which could then form the basis of an independent Kurdish state—which could, in turn, revive the Kurdish insurgency in Turkey itself.

Washington reportedly has given the Turks a green light to send their own forces into northern Kurdistan in exchange for their agreement to let the U.S. use their territory as the jumping off point for a northern invasion of as many as 35,000 U.S. troops, in addition to as much as \$16 billion in various forms of aid.

Khalilzad's advice to both the INC and the Kurds appeared to reflect the long-standing views of so-called "realists" in the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) who have been battling the pro-INC hawks centered in the offices of Vice President Dick Cheney and Pentagon chief Donald Rumsfeld over Washington's Iraq and Mideast policies since even before the September 11, 2001 attacks that launched Washington's "war on terrorism."

Huge Undertakings

The continuing struggles between administration factions were illustrated February 11th in testimony by Undersecretary of State Marc Grossman and his counterpart at the Pentagon, Douglas Feith. While Grossman ventured that a U.S. military commander would run the country for a period of two years, Feith ostentatiously disassociated himself from his

colleague's prediction, stressing that Washington wanted to hand over power as soon as possible to a new Iraqi government but that it faced a "huge undertaking. ... We cannot now even venture a sensible guess as to the amount of time," he said. Feith is known as a major INC supporter within the administration.

The failure of both witnesses to give clearer answers about costs, strategy, and other aspects of a post-invasion Iraq clearly exasperated many of the senators, who complained that they've been getting many of the same questions from U.S. allies who have been disappointed by the lack of U.S. follow-up in Afghanistan.

Senator Joseph Biden remarked to Grossman that, "Every European leader I've met with the last year is worried you don't have any plan, because they've heard all this rhetoric about no nation-building, heard all this rhetoric about we're warriors, we're going to fight the war, and we're going to leave. They've heard all this rhetoric. And guess what? They believe our rhetoric."

"To state the obvious, Iraq is a heck of a lot more complicated, a heck of a lot more sophisticated, and they live in a neighborhood that is very, very, very complex," said Biden, who also expressed concerns that even groups allied with the INC had conflicting agendas.

"I predict to you that Kirkuk is going to make Mitrovica look like a picnic," Biden told the two witnesses, recounting a conversation he had in northern Iraq with leaders of the top Kurdish groups there. "They went out of their way ... to tell us that the Barzani and Talabani clans were together, and they were united and resolved. But then they'd say, as we were leaving, 'by the way, we've been ethnically expelled from Kirkuk for the past 20 years, methodically replacing Indo-European Kurds with Arab Sunni.' We're going home. The oil is a national asset," they quickly added, "but Kirkuk is ours. You're going to guarantee that for us, aren't you?"

Cheney Shares Skepticism

In addition to their sensitivity to the interests of Iraq's neighbors, both the State Department and the CIA, as well as the uniformed military with experience in the Gulf, have been openly skeptical about the INC, whose cause has been championed by the neoconservatives in the Pentagon and Cheney's office. They have also ridiculed the neocons' notion that democratizing Iraq would have a "domino effect" on the rest of the region.

Cheney himself, however, has reportedly come to share their skepticism, particularly of the INC head Chalabi. "When Cheney took a look at the edifice the U.S. was creating (with the INC), he apparently decided it couldn't bear the weight of international scrutiny," an anonymous official told the *Los Angeles Times* last week. The official said Cheney's distancing from the group has had a "chilling effect" on its Pentagon supporters who, according to another official, have not yet given up the fight.

The INC's supporters were deeply disturbed by another meeting last week between Khalilzad and exiled former Iraqi foreign minister Adnan Pachachi, who, according to the *New York Times*, was being sounded out for a senior position in a transitional government. As a well-respected Sunni Muslim—the minority group that has dominated Baghdad under Hussein—some U.S. officials have argued that he

would make a reassuring figure of continuity in a new government.

But the INC and its Pentagon allies protested the meeting vigorously, pointing out that Pachachi, among other views, had advocated Kuwait's absorption by Iraq from 1961 until 1999, and questioned Israel's right to exist.

"The outreach to Mr. Pachachi ... suggests that the United States is mainly interested in perpetuating the status quo in a post-Saddam Iraq, and not in promoting democracy," one official told the *Times*.

But the pro-INC forces in and outside the administration remain optimistic that ultimately Bush will support their side.

"The fact that one White House envoy is off having a rather strange meeting in the UAE is no indication that this president is going to give up on freedom for the Iraqi people," said Scheunemann. Paraphrasing a recent statement by Cheney himself, he added, "We are not going to risk American lives to replace one dictator with another."

(Jim Lobe <jlobe@starpower.net> is a political analyst Foreign Policy In Focus (online at www.fpif.org). He also writes regularly for Inter Press Service.)

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Writer: Jim Lobe

Editor: John Gershman, IRC

Layout: Tonya Cannariato, IRC