

Why We Should Transfer the Administration of Iraq to the United Nations

By Stephen Zunes | July 31, 2003

The invasion and occupation of Iraq posed new challenges to peace and justice activists. The growing credibility crisis of the Bush administration with respect to Iraq, as well as the ongoing crisis on the ground in Iraq, provides us with new opportunities. Below I present four theses on one campaign that could use these opportunities in a creative way: a campaign to turn the administration of Iraq over to the United Nations.

1. A United Nations administration would be more likely to bring peace and stability to Iraq.

The United States government is widely perceived by most Iraqis and other Middle Easterners as being less interested in the well-being of the Iraqi people than it is in the advancement of American political, military, and economic interests in the region. The apparent eagerness of the United States to invade Iraq, the gross exaggeration by U.S. officials of Iraq's military capabilities and its ties to terrorism, and many of the policies pursued by U.S. military authorities since the collapse of the Iraqi government have led many to see the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq not as an act of liberation but an act of imperialism.

As a result, there is a growing opposition in Iraq to the U.S. occupation, including a low-level armed insurgency against U.S. occupation forces, which has resulted in the deaths of scores of American servicemen. Most evidence suggests that these anti-American demonstrations and guerrilla attacks come not as much from supporters of the old regime but from ordinary Iraqis who resent a foreign military occupation of their country. Counter-insurgency operations by U.S. forces in response have resulted in the deaths of scores of Iraqi civilians, which has in turn led to an escalating spiral of violence.

By contrast, administration by the United Nations—which represents the entire international community, including eighteen Arab states—is less

likely to be seen as a foreign military occupation but rather as a transitional administration, and is therefore less likely to encourage armed opposition. Without the disruption of a growing armed insurgency, efforts at restoring basic services, maintaining stability, and setting up a democratic and representative Iraqi government would be far easier.

The Iraqi government that would emerge under UN trusteeship would be far more credible, both inside and outside Iraq, than one set up by U.S. occupation authorities, which—rightly or wrongly—would more likely be seen as nothing more than a puppet regime installed by a foreign army. Should such a U.S.-backed regime indeed not be seen as legitimate, popular resistance and instability—which would likely encourage the rise of radical nationalist and radical Islamist elements—would probably continue, requiring the continued presence of U.S. occupation forces for many years.

2. Turning over control of Iraq to the UN would be in the best interests of Americans.

American soldiers continue to die every week in Iraq. American deaths since the end of formal hostilities will likely soon surpass those killed during the war itself. The consultative council appointed by U.S. occupation forces appears to have little power or credibility among the population and Iraq appears to be a long way from genuine self-governance. It is unlikely that the Bush administration will be able to



bring to power a new Iraqi regime that has the support of the majority of the Iraqi people.

The ongoing U.S. occupation of Iraq, particularly the killings of Iraqi civilians by American soldiers, is resulting in the growth of anti-American sentiment throughout the Arab and Islamic world. This could increase the ranks of extremist groups like the terrorist al Qaeda network, whose leaders are now more easily able to portray the United States as an imperialist power committed to the conquest and subjugation of Muslim peoples and the exploitation of the region's natural resources. This would be far more difficult to do, however, if Iraq were instead provisionally governed by an international regime under UN auspices.

The 150,000 American troops currently deployed in Iraq are causing a shortage of available personnel for other potential U.S. military operations, ranging from peacekeeping operations in Liberia (which could help save that country from a humanitarian disaster) to challenging real threats to regional security (such as North Korea, which—unlike Iraq—really is developing weapons of mass destruction program). In addition, the need for a large number of reservists to fill the ranks of U.S. occupation forces are having a detrimental impact on many thousands of families and businesses back home that depend on them.

In addition, the U.S. occupation is expensive. Currently, the American taxpayer is paying for more than 85% of the costs of the post-war occupation, peacekeeping, and administration in Iraq. Under UN leadership, U.S. contributions would be no more than 20%, a major savings for the American taxpayer that would make available funding for badly needed social services at home, as well as tax relief and deficit reduction.

3. The United Nations could succeed in such an effort.

The United Nations, like other intergovernmental bodies, is an imperfect organization made up of a large number of governments with their own distinct national interests. However, because the UN represents virtually the entire international community and would be under a clear mandate to help bring

stability and democracy to Iraq, it is less likely to allow narrow political and economic interests to shape its decisions.

There have been both successes and failures in major UN peacekeeping operations in the past. Most of the failures have been a result of inadequate funding and limits placed upon UN peacekeepers' authority, not anything innately lacking in the United Nations' ability to carry out its mission.

Rarely has the UN been called upon to govern an entire nation. The most clear-cut precedent for a direct UN administration of a country for a period of time until it was ready for self-rule involved East Timor. This former Portuguese colony was under a UN trusteeship for two years between the withdrawal of Indonesian occupation forces and the establishment of an independent, democratically elected government last year. While much smaller than Iraq, East Timor in many ways presented an even more formidable challenge than Iraq: It is one of the poorest countries in the world, one-third of its population lost their lives in the initial Indonesian invasion and occupation in the late 1970s, and much of the country's infrastructure was destroyed in a scorched-earth policy by Indonesian occupation forces and their East Timorese collaborators as they withdrew in September 2000. Despite some logistical problems, the UN operation in East Timor has widely been hailed as a major success and the new East Timorese government has emerged as a strong and democratic U.S. ally.

Should the Bush administration decide it does not want any Americans to stay in Iraq under UN command, it could simply withdraw U.S. forces and not contribute to the peacekeeping operations. While the United States is indispensable in certain kinds of military operations, such as those requiring rapid power projection, there are more than adequate forces available for deployment in Iraq from other UN member states for the peacekeeping and administrative operations necessary to maintain order and oversee the transition to a democratic government. There are quite a few countries, including major Western European allies, which are currently unwilling to contribute troops under what they see as an illegal U.S.

occupation that would be quite ready to submit forces under a legitimate UN operation.

4. Such a campaign is winnable.

Public opinion polls published during the first week of July indicate that 60% of the American public believes that the United Nations should take leadership in post-war Iraq. Not surprisingly, there is strong support from liberals who have traditionally been skeptical of U.S. unilateralism and have supported a stronger role for the United Nations. However, there is also strong support from some moderates and conservatives who believe that there should be greater burden-sharing in the cause of nation-building and that it should not primarily be Americans who sacrifice lives and resources to bring greater freedom and stability to Iraq.

This could finally lead Democratic members of Congress and presidential aspirants, who have largely supported the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, to distance themselves from the policies of the Bush administration and join the majority of Americans who support giving the United Nations the leading role in Iraq. The Bush administration has been able to get away with its policies toward Iraq up to this point because only smaller parties, like the Greens and Libertarians, have been willing to voice their opposition. With the Democrats joining the call for turning over administration and peacekeeping to the United Nations, the Bush administration would find itself far more isolated politically than it has been up until now.

The Bush administration is already finding that popular support for its policies in post-invasion Iraq is significantly less than during the actual invasion itself, particularly given the growing realization by the American public that they were misled regarding the threat Saddam Hussein's regime posed to the United States and the world. There are already concerns among Republican leaders about facing an election year with American soldiers coming home from Iraq in body bags week after week with no clear end in sight.

Bush administration officials may decide that fighting off reasonable proposals for a UN administration

may call into question their last remaining credible rationalization for the invasion: the desire to bring stability and democracy to Iraq. In insisting that the United States, not the international community, has the right to determine the future of Iraq, it would only increase uncharitable speculation regarding the actual U.S. motivation for controlling that oil-rich country. The result could be that the administration may find that it would be in its favor to cut its losses and acquiesce to domestic and international pressure.

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