

A Return to the UN?

By Phyllis Bennis | September 4, 2003

The recent Bush administration's draft UN resolution proposing a new role for the United Nations in Iraq is not a reflection of any concern regarding the illegality of the occupation, the lack of legitimacy of the U.S. presence in Iraq, or the impact on Iraqis of Washington's abject failure to provide for even the minimal humanitarian needs of the population. Instead, it reflects a growing concern regarding what the *New York Times* called the "high cost of occupation" for the U.S. in Iraq—costs both in U.S. soldiers' lives and in dollars.

The high price in dollars is being paid by U.S. taxpayers as the administration is planning an emergency request of \$60-70 billion to cover current fighting and reconstruction costs. This follows \$79 billion that was released in April 2003. The beneficiaries are corporations close to the Bush administration, notably Halliburton and Bechtel, which are earning billions of dollars. The high price in lives is being paid by U.S. troops assigned to state-building duties for which they have no training, by Iraqi translators and other Iraqis working with and for the U.S. occupation authorities, and by UN humanitarian staff who are seen as working under or within the U.S. occupation structure. The highest price in lives is paid by Iraqi civilians, both in armed attacks and as a result of the lack of sufficient clean water, electricity, and medical care.

The current proposal under consideration calls for the creation of a UN-endorsed multilateral military force to join the U.S. occupation force in Iraq. It would function as a separate, parallel force with a separate command structure, but the commander would be an American. U.S. officials make clear their intention that the multilateral force would be accountable to the Pentagon's strategic control. There is a history of this kind of U.S. control of UN peace-keeping operations through imposing a U.S. general or admiral as UN commander. This was U.S. practice during the Clinton administration in Somalia, Haiti, and elsewhere.

But what is unprecedented is that the plan does not envision Washington even sharing authority and deci-

sionmaking with the UN itself or with the governments sending international contingents, let alone ending its occupation and turning over full authority to the UN to oversee a rapid return to Iraqi independence.

A number of countries, facing U.S. pressure, might be prepared to send troops with a new UN resolution providing an international imprimatur. U.S. officials have actually described a new UN resolution's value as providing "political cover" to governments wanting to participate but restrained by public opposition. Countries under particular pressure to send troops include Pakistan, Turkey, and India. It is likely that many members of the Security Council might be willing to cave in to such pressure. Any resolution, however, would also have to win approval from Russia, Germany, and especially France—which have made positive remarks about the resolution but are likely to demand more control for the Security Council over the mission. French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin said that "the eventual arrangements cannot just be the enlargement or adjustment of the current occupation forces. We have to install a real international force under a mandate of the United Nations Security Council."

The new UN resolution also encourages other countries to contribute funds, as well as troops, to the U.S. occupation. A donors conference is scheduled for late October in Spain, a key U.S. ally. If a UN resolution is passed before that date with little acrimony in the Security Council, new amounts of financial support will be forthcoming.



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What Should Be Done

- 1) Any new UN resolution aimed at providing more legitimacy for the U.S.-UK occupation of Iraq should be opposed. Countries should not send troops or funds to maintain or strengthen or “internationalize” Washington’s occupation.
- 2) Oppose Richard Perle’s claim that “our main mistake is that we haven’t succeeded in working closely with Iraqis before the war so that an Iraqi opposition could have been able to immediately take the matter in hand.” Instead, the over-reliance of the Bush administration on the claims of the exiled Iraqi opposition, driven by self-interest and ideological fervor rather than grounded information, is one of the main reasons for the U.S. failure to anticipate the post-war crisis in Iraq.
- 3) Only after the U.S.-UK occupation has ended should the United Nations and a multilateral peacekeeping force return to Iraq. Their mandate should be for a very short and defined period, with the goal of assisting Iraq in reconstruction and overseeing election of a governing authority.
- 4) As belligerent powers who initiated the war, and as occupying powers, the U.S. and the UK are required to provide for the humanitarian needs of

the Iraqi people. While their military occupation should be ended immediately, Washington and London remain obligated to pay the continuing costs of Iraq’s reconstruction, including the bulk of the cost of UN humanitarian and peacekeeping deployments. The U.S. should immediately make public a realistic estimate for the cost of reconstruction in Iraq. Washington should turn over funds to UN authority, beginning with a direct grant of at least \$75 billion (the initial amount spent on waging the war) for reconstruction work. These funds should be raised from an excess profits tax on corporations benefiting from the war and post-war privatization in Iraq, as well as from Pentagon budget lines initially aimed at carrying out war in Iraq.

- 5) The U.S. should use this moment to reverse its longstanding opposition to the creation of a standing UN rapid-reaction military force, beginning with reconstituting the UN Charter-mandated Military Staff Committee.

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Recommended citation:

Phyllis Bennis, “A Return to the UN?,” (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, September 4, 2003).

Web location:

<http://www.presentdanger.org/commentary/2003/0309iraqun.html>

Production Information:

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Editors: Erik Leaver, IPS and John Gershman, IRC

Layout: Tonya Cannariato, IRC

