

UN Resolution 1511 and the Iraqi Occupation

By Ian Williams | October 16, 2003

Well-spun by U.S. and British press handlers, the wire services announced the unanimous passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1511 as a victory for American diplomacy. And so it was, in the sense that a bald man winning a hair brush in a raffle could claim a victory.

The resolution called on the U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq to return governing authority to the people of that country “as soon as practicable.” In addition, the Council urged Member States to contribute to a multinational force in Iraq to maintain security under a unified command until the establishment of a representative government, at which time its mandate would expire. The Security Council will review the requirements and mission of the force within one year.

The Bush administration did finally get their resolution, but the question is, can they do anything with it? The short answer is “not a lot.” The White House did not seek this resolution because they felt a need for moral and legal absolution and approbation from the United Nations. It wanted it as a means to four specific goals: to coax more troop contributions from reluctant governments; to coax more cash for Iraqi reconstruction; to coax Kofi Annan to return UN civilian staff to Iraq; and perhaps most of all, reinforced by the previous three, to persuade the bulk of Iraqis that they weren't really occupied at all.

It is highly unlikely to secure any of those goals. On the other hand, it contains so many verbal concessions, and pledges for a rapid transition to Iraqi self-governance, that, even if they are thoroughly hedged in substance, the U.S. has put itself ineluctably on a slippery slope to a more genuinely multilateral approach. The slope is of course helpfully greased with facts on the ground in Iraq, and impending votes on the ground in the U.S.

The key issue for which Russia, France, and Germany had been holding out was a time table for a constitution, elections, and independence, and for the possibility of handing over power before the whole process

was finished. They seem to have won the latter point, more as a hypothesis than a promise, and they ended up with a timetable for a timetable. The Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) must present a timetable for constitution and elections by December 15th.

The Resolution as Theology

The obsessive—and self defeating—refusal of the U.S. to hand over the reins, or even to promise when and how it would do so, almost scuppered the deal, and by the end it almost looked as if there had been a team of theologians and metaphysicists on the drafting team.

How else can you explain almost self-mocking statements such as clause 4 which

“Determines that the Governing Council and its ministers are the principal bodies of the Iraqi interim administration, which, without prejudice to its further evolution, embodies the sovereignty of the State of Iraq during the transitional period until an internationally recognized, representative government is established and assumes the responsibilities of the Authority.”

How a body can “embody” sovereignty when, even as the resolution was being presented, the U.S. was telling it that there would be 10,000 Turkish troops entering its territory, despite the stated wishes of the IGC, and indeed despite the opinion of most Turks? “They have the right to make their views known,” a sponsoring diplomat declared in explanation, which as sovereignty goes, does not really go very far.

Equally, the preamble which claims to be *“Underscoring that the sovereignty of Iraq resides in the State of Iraq, reaffirming the right of the Iraqi people freely to determine their own political future*



and control their own natural resources,” does not really sit well with the determination to privatize anything in sight and remove barriers to foreign ownership while dispensing vastly overpriced contracts to GOP contributors.

The resolution also “*emphasized*” that the international board of supervisors for the Iraq Development Fund should be hurried up. The small print neglected to mention that the IMF, World Bank, and others have been refusing to take part in the face of Paul Bremer’s refusal to let them really supervise the fund instead rubber-stamping the accounts, Wall Street style.

A Multinational Occupation?

It is a measure of the lack of mandate in the resolution that it could not even order the UN Secretary General to send civilian personnel back to Iraq, but “requests” him to do so, “as circumstances permit.” And he solemnly promised while almost visibly crossing his fingers behind his back and thanking them for the “flexibility” they granted, after he had almost mutinied the week before. “I shall do my utmost,” he said, “bearing in mind the constraints on building up the required capacity, and my obligation to care for the safety and security of United Nations staff.”

So, as long as bombs are going off, and internationals are being shot at, the UN’s “vital role” is likely to be at a standstill. Or there would have to be some serious vitality in the role to make it worthwhile staff risking their lives. Which is where the resolution will fail. By maintaining the reality of occupation, despite the theological niceties, the U.S. is guaranteeing continuing resistance (or terrorist activity, pick your own vocabulary) and making it very unlikely that troop contributors will come rushing, even for what is now a multilateral force.

For a start, the force just happens to have the same command chain as before. Donald Rumsfeld does not induce automatic feelings of cuddly multilateralism in most of the world. Even so, the multinational force must report back to the Council. Its mandate has to be reviewed within a year and runs out when a representative government is established.

There are some dangerous implications that slipped by in the resolution. Diplomats did not seem to notice that as David Kay’s recent report acknowledged that there were no signs of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq, some bright State Department lawyer slipped into the preamble the “reaffirmation” not only of other Iraq resolutions, but “including resolution 1373 (2001) of 28 September 2001, and other relevant resolutions.” Resolution 1373 was passed two weeks after the World Trade Center attacks, and in effect declared the U.S. was acting in self-defense in going after the Taliban. One cannot help suspecting an attempt at retrospective justification since clearly the WMD gambit leaves a little to be desired, factually and legally.

In a similar context, the paranoid, reasonably so or otherwise, should also watch clause 19, which “calls upon Member States to prevent the transit of terrorists to Iraq, arms for terrorists, and financing that would support terrorists, and emphasizes the importance of strengthening the cooperation of the countries of the region, particularly neighbours of Iraq, in this regard.” We may hear some more of this “watch out Damascus Clause” in the near future.

Even so, the holdouts on the Security Council probably did the right thing by going along with the resolution. It costs them nothing, and Washington had to make many concessions, which although minor, must really gall some people in the Pentagon.

Overall the resolution is highly unlikely to get the U.S. what it wants, and makes many concessions. In a month or two, the U.S. will come back with another resolution when things don’t work out, and there will be further concessions. The election is getting closer and even if it is called a Multinational Force, there are still a lot of GIs stuck in the quagmire, whose restlessness is leaking homewards even as their term of duty is extended.

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