

Bush on Middle East “Democracy” & “Ending Occupation” in Iraq

by Phyllis Bennis | November 21, 2003

Facing the most serious escalation in U.S. casualties in Iraq, with the *New York Times* proclaiming “Iraq Policy in Crisis,” and with the specter of Viet Nam-style quagmire hovering over the 2004 elections, the Bush administration has issued two major policy pronouncements. One was the November 6 speech on democracy in the Middle East, the other a high-profile timetable for ostensibly turning some authority over to Iraqis.

Both statements are critical. The first lays out the administration’s official new rationale for the Iraq war—designed to divert public attention from the lies regarding weapons of mass destruction. The second is primarily the Bush campaign effort to convince Americans the U.S. will not be bogged down in Iraq by July 2004, just five months before the elections. The effect of the shift will be to abandon even the current claim of “democratization” in Iraq in favor embracing the Iraqization of the U.S. war.

Bush’s speech on November 6 called for a “forward strategy of freedom,” placing his claimed commitment to democratization in the Middle East on par with Reagan’s cold war call for democratization in Eastern Europe. He acknowledged that earlier U.S. policies of accommodating repressive regimes in the region “did nothing to make us safe,” but offered no indication of an actual new approach.

Bush’s speech on democracy in the Middle East is thoroughly hypocritical. While acknowledging “sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East,” Bush’s “forward strategy of freedom” proposed nothing to actually change the lack of freedom. While repeating the usual threats toward Syria, Iran, and Palestine, Bush praised the king of Morocco and the Gulf petro-states for their small, and in many cases largely cosmetic steps toward democracy. He lauded close U.S. allies Saudi Arabia and Egypt for initial and potential democratic openings, but assured them that

“working democracies always need time to develop,” thus alleviating any fear of serious pressure on Riyadh or Cairo.

In a particularly cynical note, Bush quoted from the UN Arab Development Report’s assessment that “the global wave of democracy has—and I quote—‘barely reached the Arab states.’” **But he credited it only as “a recent report by Arab scholars,” refusing even to acknowledge the United Nations contribution.**

The speech, and the announcement of a new “forward strategy for freedom” was designed to give a popular cover to what has emerged as a permanent war—framing Bush’s preventive “war on terrorism” as a “war for liberty.” It was designed to imply that the current war in Iraq was also waged “for liberty,” to distract the American people from the sham reasons actually given for the war: the embarrassingly missing WMDs, the non-existent “imminent danger,” and the false claims of Iraq’s links with al Qaeda.

What does the new Iraq timetable call for?

End of Feb 2004:

Iraqi army and security forces to be placed under Iraqi civilian control—Maybe. In fact Pentagon officials are already angling to retain U.S. control of the Iraqi military. (The U.S. military will remain in Iraq under full U.S. command.)



End of June 2004:

“Sovereign” provisional government to be established—based on regional assemblies chosen largely by the Governing Council and vetted by the U.S.

U.S. dissolves Coalition Provisional Authority—but does not remove U.S. troops, end U.S. control over the \$20 billion in reconstruction funds, or potentially even end the presence and role of Bremer and his team (only the title would change).

End of 2005:

New constitution by committee chosen by the U.S.-vetted national assembly.

New government elected according to that constitution.

Why are They Changing the Policy Now?

The new strategy announced by the Bush administration reflects the abject failure of the U.S. occupation of Iraq and their desperation for new approaches. U.S. casualties continue to escalate, particularly with the increase in helicopters being shot down, with dozens of U.S. soldiers killed. More than 400 U.S. soldiers have been killed in Iraq. Iraq remains unstable and dangerous, with unknown thousands of Iraqi civilian casualties.

Two new Iraqi polls, one by the State Department’s intelligence office, the other by Gallup, confirm that Iraqis do not support the U.S. occupation. According to Gallup, only 5% of Iraqis believe the U.S. invaded Iraq “to assist the Iraqi people,” and 4% believe it was to destroy WMDs. Only 1% believe it was to establish democracy, while 43% said the U.S.-UK invasion was “to rob Iraq’s oil.” The State Dept. poll, included within the top-secret CIA report of Nov. 10, showed that a majority of Iraqis view the U.S. troops as occupiers, not liberators. Three-quarters believe the decisions of the U.S.-appointed Iraqi Governing Council are “mostly determined by the [U.S.] coalition,” and they do not believe the appointed Council is capable of governing or planning elections.

Iraqi resistance to the original U.S. timetable was on the rise. It called for appointing the Governing Council, then appointing a constitutional committee, then drafting a constitution, then holding elections. Demands for early elections increased, particularly from the Shia’s majority and especially from the influential Shia’s leader Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. The U.S.-appointed Governing Council, still without legitimacy, essentially stalled, and indeed some Council members began to challenge the U.S. timetable.

The U.S.-imposed privatization scheme is increasingly recognized as illegal, since it was imposed by the U.S. and not adopted by a legitimate Iraqi government. Under international law, an occupying power is extremely limited in how it benefits from the economy of the occupied territory. (The analogy is to a house-sitter—who is allowed to eat the food in the refrigerator, but not to put the house on the market and sell it for condominiums.) International business insurance companies are refusing to provide insurance for purchases of Iraqi infrastructure put on the market by Bremer and the U.S. occupation forces. U.S. agencies, including the Ex-Im Bank, appear ready to pick up the slack, but the danger remains that a future truly independent government in Iraq might reject earlier contracts, deeming them null and void because they were not signed by a legitimate government. (That would mean, of course, that U.S. taxpayers would have to foot the bill to bail out those corporations who lose their assets in any renationalization scheme.) Some in the Governing Council and in the U.S. occupation forces seem to believe that creating something called a “government,” even if interim, might stave off the taint of illegitimacy that currently hovers over all the U.S.-imposed economic policies.

International allies are still refusing to send troops or significant funds to back the U.S. occupation. Even countries that had agreed to send token troops deployments (Japan, South Korea) are renegeing on those commitments; Italy and perhaps others with troops in Iraq now will soon be under significant domestic pressure to withdraw.

U.S. election timetables remain a critical factor. Bush's advisers are certainly increasingly worried about the impact of U.S. casualties, the bad press over Iraq policy generally, and the vision of quagmire now on the front pages.

What Won't Change?

According to Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, U.S. troops will remain in Iraq. This will still be a U.S. occupation, but that reality will be denied and identified instead as "U.S. troops present at the request of the sovereign Iraqi government."

Military opposition and thus U.S. casualties will continue unabated since there will be little change in the presence of U.S. occupation troops throughout Iraq.

The billions in reconstruction funds will remain under full U.S. control. Control of the reconstruction and privatization contracts will presumably remain in U.S. hands.

The UN will remain largely marginalized; whatever participation it is allowed will be under the domination of U.S. control.

So What are the New Problems?

U.S. declarations of a "sovereign government" in Iraq do not provide legitimacy. There will still be a U.S. occupation in place, but it will not be acknowledged. The so-called "sovereign government" will still be illegitimate—having been chosen through a process flawed from the beginning by its control by the U.S. and U.S.-appointed Council members. When that illegitimate government begins the process of drafting a constitution, that process will be flawed as well.

The U.S. may intend to involve NATO in Iraq, according to European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana. This would pressure Washington's European allies to send troops, and NATO would provide a veneer of international credibility while remaining under Washington's domination. Such a move would require unanimous agreement in

NATO, including France and Germany, who might insist on a larger political role for the UN in return. Solana may be making this statement to pressure Washington to increase NATO's role; his claim may reflect Colin Powell's view, it is unlikely to represent the Bush administration's position as a whole.

The U.S. will not allow the United Nations a truly independent role. German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer urged greater UN participation in order "to give the process wider legitimacy." U.S. pressure in the Security Council could lead to exactly that result. UN member states might also be pressured by Washington to acquiesce to or even endorse NATO's role to provide international approval.

So What Do We Call for?

The U.S. occupation remains illegal. Neither an "invitation" from a U.S.-created "government" nor a U.S.-controlled NATO deployment will make this occupation legal. We call for an end to the U.S. military occupation of Iraq.

The withdrawal of the U.S. military should be paralleled by the entry into Iraq of an independent UN mission, backed by the Arab League, to provide political assistance in arranging elections, humanitarian assistance, and a peacekeeping contingent to maintain stability while Iraq is reclaiming its sovereignty. While the election process is underway, UN and Arab League troops should immediately work to restore the capacity of the Iraqi security forces to provide security under the authority of the new legitimate government as it comes into existence.

The UN should refuse to play a role in Iraq while the U.S. occupation continues. It should defy Washington's efforts to use the global institution to give an international or legal façade to the U.S. war. The UN should reject any U.S. campaign to endorse a NATO deployment.

The U.S. should end its control of all reconstruction funds in Iraq. That money, whether donated by the U.S. or by other countries, should be turned over to the United Nations for distribution to a truly sov-

foreign Iraqi government as it comes into existence, on the same basis as UN projects elsewhere in the world.

The U.S.-imposed privatization of Iraq should be declared null and void. Only after a legitimate sovereign government has been created should any reworking of Iraq's economy be undertaken, and then only as determined by that new government.

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