

Bush Administration Faces Growing Chaos in Iraq

By Jim Lobe | January 29, 2004

Retired Gen. Anthony Zinni began warning that ousting Saddam Hussein, let alone invading Iraq, risked destabilizing the entire Middle East back in 1998, when he led U.S. Central Command and testified against the Iraq Liberation Act that made “regime change” official U.S. policy. And just six months before the actual invasion last March, in October 2002, he told the annual Fletcher Conference on National Security Strategy, “we are about to do something that will ignite a fuse in this region that we will rue the day we ever started.”

While President George W. Bush tried hard to project a sense of confidence and control concerning Iraq and the larger Middle East in his State of the Union Address on Tuesday, a careful look at the news this week suggested that Zinni’s fears were not unfounded.

Talk of possible civil war in Iraq finally reached the front pages of U.S. newspapers, while reports that at least some elements of the administration are pushing for military action against Hezbollah in Lebanon and targets in Syria surfaced for the first time since last summer. At the same time, by omitting any reference to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in his speech, Bush indicated he has no intention of seriously pressing either party toward a cease-fire, let alone peace talks designed to meet the goal of the “roadmap”: securing Palestinian statehood by next year.

In other words, the outlook for the region between the eastern Mediterranean and Iran 10 months after U.S. troops launched their drive from Kuwait to Iraq is in for more—possibly a lot more—turbulence.

Long before this week, demands by Iraqi Kurds for virtually total autonomy, including the retention of their own *pesh merga* force, in a new, federal Iraq have been drawing grim warnings from neighboring Turkey, Iran, and Syria—which all have large and restive Kurdish populations.

But last week’s rejection—by Iraq’s most powerful Shiite cleric, Ayatollah Ali al-Husseini al-Sistani—of a U.S. plan to transfer sovereignty to a transitional government that will not be directly elected by the Iraqi people, has brought home the message that whatever progress Washington is making in suppressing the insurgency in the “Sunni Triangle” of central Iraq could very quickly be overwhelmed by the lack of a credible political strategy.

“CIA officers in Iraq are warning that the country may be on a path to civil war,” was the lead sentence in a front-page article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* on January 22.

The article, written by veteran Knight-Ridder reporters who have consistently led the mainstream media in uncovering secrets the Bush administration would rather not have exposed, quoted senior U.S. officials as saying that failure to satisfy demands for direct elections could spark an uprising by much of the heretofore friendly Shi’a population, who make up 60% or more of Iraq’s 24 million people. That message was underscored by the mobilization of hundreds of thousands of Shiites in protest demonstrations over the past week—a display of discipline and organization that clearly surprised the administration.

If the Shi’a turn against the U.S.-led coalition, “this would be like losing the Buddhists in Vietnam,” Anthony Cordesman, a Mideast expert at the conservative Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), told the *Financial Times* Friday, referring to the U.S. war against that Asian country in the 1960s and ‘70s. “It would mean losing the war.”

Caught in a Box

However unattractive that option seems, holding the direct elections Sistani is demanding—which almost certainly would bring a Shi’a-dominated government to power—is also considered distinctly dangerous. “We can’t simply walk away and let the Shi’a dictate the shape of the new government,” warned John Hamre, deputy defense secretary under Bush’s predecessor Bill Clinton, earlier this week, “because that will likely unleash a civil war in Iraq.” Hamre, who as CSIS’ president led an independent task force to Iraq last August to review the situation at Pentagon chief Donald Rumsfeld’s behest, described the administration as “caught in a box.”

A box with more than a few sharp edges, too. Sistani and his followers have made clear that they, as well as the Sunnis, strongly oppose a federal system that would give Kurds the autonomy they seek, particularly if the north-ers were to claim oil-rich Kirkuk as theirs.



Deadly clashes between the *pesh merga* and Turkomen and Arab residents in Kirkuk and parts of the northern Sunni Triangle have been a constant, albeit under-reported, feature of the landscape for months, but they might only be a warm-up to a much bigger struggle, unless the administration prevails on the Kurds to stand down. The fact that Washington has permitted the *pesh merga* to retain its arms has not helped matters.

Meanwhile, tensions between Shi'as and Sunnis, who have dominated Iraqi governments since independence, have mounted steadily since Dec. 9, when three Sunnis were killed in an explosion at a Baghdad mosque.

While Washington says it agrees with Sistani that direct elections are best, it insists there is not enough time to hold them before the scheduled June 30 turnover, a date that was decided more out of concern for Bush's re-election campaign than by a commitment to build viable democratic institutions in Iraq.

If the complicated "caucus" system that Washington proposed in November will not work, the administration appears poised to back the creation of an enlarged Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) as the transitional government, although there is no agreement on how its members would be chosen.

Washington hopes that Sistani, who has indicated he will abide by the recommendations of UN experts as to how to proceed, will be willing to deal. In this context, the administration appears increasingly frantic about involving the United Nations, which plans to send a team to Iraq to assess the situation next week.

While it hopes the world body can devise an agreement that will keep all parties calm and its transition timetable on track, Washington also clearly sees it as a convenient scapegoat if things go bad.

Expanding the War on Terror

Not content with the mounting signs of civil war in Iraq, however, the Pentagon, presumably with the help of

Vice President Dick Cheney's office, was reported this week by *Jane's Intelligence Digest* to be drawing up plans for carrying out raids on Hezbollah targets in Lebanon and Syria, in what would be a notable expansion of Bush's "war on terror."

Some of the same personnel who worked in the Pentagon's Office of Special Plans (OSP), which reviewed intelligence for evidence allegedly linking Saddam to the al Qaeda terrorist group and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs before the Iraq invasion, have reportedly been working on a similar effort regarding Syria. David Wurmser, a neoconservative who has long advocated destabilizing Damascus through Lebanon and Iraq, joined Cheney's staff as his Mideast adviser last September. An administration ally, Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Pat Roberts, also suggested this week that Iraq's alleged WMD stockpiles were transported to Syria before the war.

Most observers here believe the administration is unlikely to authorize such operations before the November presidential elections, if only because it would fuel voter concerns and Democratic charges that the president's conduct of the "war on terror" has been reckless and far too costly in blood, treasure, and alliances.

They suggest the reports are being deliberately circulated to intimidate Syria's Assad regime into complying with a series of U.S. demands, including cutting off aid to Hezbollah and Palestinian groups.

Jane's noted, however, that U.S. attacks against Hezbollah in Lebanon could well destabilize that country only a decade after its last civil war.

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p. 2

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