

The Bush administration seems to rediscover the virtues of the UN as it seeks an exit strategy from Iraq

By Ian Williams | May 18, 2004

On July 1, will President George W. Bush stand up and unctuously regret American military dead who gave their lives “for the United Nations?” It may seem unlikely—but some version of that shedding of responsibility is certainly the reason for the administration’s current expedient and temporary love affair with the international organization. It is certainly not so eager to give up power there.

So why should the UN fall for it? Because in fact, the organization has no option but to try to help Iraq; even though it realizes that the way it exercises those options will have serious consequences. It will have to steer between the Scylla and Charybdis of international principles and U.S. interests.

All sides agree that the UN’s most important role, based upon what Kofi Annan has called the UN’s “unique legitimacy” is to act as midwife for a virgin birth: a new Iraqi government free from all taint of occupational sin.

However, the arguments begin with the degree of baptism for the new baby. Many in the Bush administration want nothing more than a perfunctory sprinkling by UN Special Envoy to Iraq Lakhdar Brahimi, while most Iraqis and the rest of the world want a thorough scrubbing to ensure that the Iraqi government is indeed independent.

Divides Within the Bush Administration

Only a totally Panglossian optimist can think that the U.S. administration is united behind one plan. Washington’s agenda is confused, as always, almost to the point of duplicity. The primary concern is, of course, the forthcoming Presidential election, in which Iraq will loom large, not least with the continuing death toll there one year after President Bush declared “mission accomplished” and an end to hostilities.

On one extreme are those in the Pentagon who are trying to thwart any assumption of a genuinely independent role by the UN, tailing gradually to those less theological in their attitudes to the organization who are quite happy to slough off blame for the mess in Iraq as long as the U.S. maintains real power.

There may even be some, in the State Department at least, who just want the whole thing to be over with, since they are well aware of the damage that the Iraq invasion is continuing to inflict on American prestige and diplomacy and can see that the UN is crucial to the process of disengagement.

Bush exercises strong discipline on his team, and so seems to have gagged the more fundamentalist neocon types in the Pentagon and Cheney’s office. A year ago, neocon polemicist and former Defense Policy Board chair Richard Perle cheered the death of the UN—now he is silent. Since a UN leaf is necessary for the election, he and his soul mates have just had to button it and bear their pain silently.

The Oil for Food Scandal

That is not, however, in their nature, hence the sudden otherwise perplexing flurry of stories about the “UN Oil for Food Scandal,” with Senate and House hearings and *National Review* and *Wall St Journal* editorials—not to mention William Safire’s amen corner in the *New York Times*. In fact, there was a scandal, but it had very little to do with the UN directly. Of the \$10 billion that Saddam allegedly gained in oil



sales, over half came from smuggling to neighboring countries like Turkey and Jordan. Washington did not say a word while such U.S. allies were the beneficiaries, but only became expediently exercised about Syrian imports after Damascus's rapprochement with their Ba'athist cousins.

The rest of the money came from Iraqi organized skimming on contracts about which the UN Oil for Food program warned the Security Council's sanctions committee. The Council ordered some changes but spent much more time scrutinizing contracts for dual use imports than worrying about oil prices.

In the end, the alleged UN connection comes down to the fact that Kofi Annan's son used to work for one of the consultancy companies that helped check on delivery of the contracts, and one or two names that may have been those of UN staff were on a list of several hundred alleged beneficiaries of Saddam's kickback schemes.

The list and much of the accusations originated with Ahmed Chalabi, whose own credibility, suffice it to say, is not without question. He is still wanted in Jordan for massive bank fraud, was the main source for all the allegations of weapons of mass destruction that no one has been able to find, and is still getting paid over \$300,000 a month by the U.S. for his faulty intelligence. It is no coincidence that whatever plans Brahimi and the UN have for a new Iraqi government exclude Chalabi and his associates.

It is also no coincidence that it is the neocon friends of Chalabi, and enemies of the UN and all it stands for, who are making the most noise about the "Scandal." They are, of course, silent about the corporate nepotism of giving Halliburton, the Vice President's former company, uncontested contracts worth billions. They are unlikely to raise the question of the missing accounts for the \$7.6 billion in the Oil for Food Surplus that the UN was ordered to hand over to the Coalition.

In short, the target here is not a forensic examination of the Oil for Food program; it is a preemptive strike to exclude the UN from any significant part in the Iraqi transition, reflecting the diehard fundamentalists in the Bush administration. However, the fall-back position, as William Safire almost candidly

admitted in the *New York Times* of May 3, is to weaken the UN and make it more pliable to American wishes.

Brahimi's Challenge

That is of course all the more reason for the UN *not* to allow itself to be bullied into destroying whatever chances a transition in Iraq has. If it is seen to bend to Washington's whims, then Brahimi's mission has already failed. Indeed, the U.S. administration's anxiety over the upcoming presidential election has put the UN in an uncommonly strong position.

At the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, U.S. Ambassador to the UN John Negroponte defended Brahimi from an indignant attack by Israel's UN ambassador. Brahimi, a former Algerian Foreign Minister, was quoted in an interview from Baghdad as saying that Israeli policies toward Palestinians and Washington's support for them hindered his search for a transition government. "The problems are linked, there is no doubt about it. The big poison in the region is the Israeli policy of domination and the suffering imposed on the Palestinians." He complained of the difficulty of dealing with Iraqis in the face of "Israel's completely violent and repressive security policy and determination to occupy more and more Palestinian territory."

Ambassador Dan Gillerman of Israel dashed off a letter demanding Annan "that you alert Mr. Brahimi of his misconduct, and ensure that in the future UN officials meet the requirements of professionalism and impartiality expected of them by the UN Charter and the international community."

Ironically, his attack gave a big boost to Brahimi's credibility in Iraq, and indeed in the UN where few outside the Israeli mission would disagree with his diagnosis. Brahimi does seem to have the beginnings of a solution to the impasse of giving birth to a new government relatively uncontaminated by American influence. While he is wrestling with the parties in Baghdad, however, the infighting in Washington will certainly heat up—the noise about Oil for Food being just one reflection.

Another is the text of the UN resolution that Washington now wants. People in the administration claimed originally that previous resolutions authorized the U.S. to call itself and its allies a multinational force operating with a UN mandate. That is not quite the way the rest of the Council sees it. But even the first leaks of the drafts seem way off the mark, and show all the handiwork of the neocon warriors from another dimension around Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney.

It is unlikely that the Security Council will accept a “sovereign” Iraqi regime that does not have control over its own troops, let alone the foreign forces stationed there, and does not even control its own finances. Ambassador Negroponte, who is going from the UN to replace current head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, L. Paul Bremer, with the title of Ambassador to Iraq, may be a more accomplished diplomat, but his record of supervising Contra operations in Central America suggests that he will still act more like a Viceroy than an envoy.

One proposal is almost certain to stoke up the fires among members of the Security Council still feeling bruised by last year’s American bullying. It is that UNMOVIC be officially disbanded, and its work completed by the American Iraqi Inspection Group. This would of course entail the Americans assuming the international authority to justify their invasion

retrospectively, and so is unlikely to go down well with the majority of members.

Any solution that does not give Brahimi’s new administration a relatively free hand is certain to fail—instead of just being very difficult. Brahimi and the UN have to secure a declaration that agreements made by the IGC are not binding on its successors, that foreign troops will leave if and when they are asked and that some of the crushing burden of debt and reparations is lifted. If they can secure that, then we know that Karl Rove and George Bush are really worried about the election in November.

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