

Charging on in Iraq—But Which Way?

By Colonel Daniel Smith, USA (Ret.) | June 7, 2004

“The most important thing is the electricity.”

Neither a complaint nor a question, it is more a statement of fact. Above all, it stands as a judgment that sums the attitude of an ordinary Iraqi, Saad Abbas, as the fourteen-month U.S.-led occupation winds down (*Washington Post*, June 3, 2004).

As Iraq enters the final three weeks in the life of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), the power exerted by the inhabitants of the heavily guarded “Green Zone” is rapidly dissipating as other “centers of gravity” re-emerge and vie for influence. How much “electricity” each can generate within Iraq will determine the country’s future course.

Of course, power centers outside the country will exert some influence. Perhaps the most significant of these is the UN, which, in the person of the Secretary-General’s special envoy Lakhdar Brahimi, attempted to discharge a most difficult mandate: negotiate the shape and composition of Iraq’s seven-month interim administration that is to hold and transmit power from the CPA to a transitional government indirectly elected by the Iraqi people in January 2005. In the end, both the efforts of Brahimi and the maneuvers of L. Paul Bremer, the CPA head, were short-circuited by the CPA-appointed Iraqi Governing Council which secured three of the top four positions in the interim administration for its candidates.

The current UN focus is on a new Security Council resolution which is to detail the specifics of exactly what constitutes the “full sovereignty” President Bush pledged to restore to Iraq on June 30, 2004. The Iraqis, already burned by promises not kept by the CPA and concerned that “full sovereignty” not end up as mere “formal sovereignty,” dispatched their new foreign minister, Hoshiyar Zebari, to New York to insist on complete empowerment of the interim administration.

In rightfully insisting on regaining full control over its affairs, the new central administration is reflecting the position of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the most revered Iraqi Shi’ite cleric. Part of al-Sistani’s charge to the new secular authorities is to secure sovereignty that is “full and unflawed in any of its political, economic, military or security aspects, as well as to strive to remove all the consequences of the occupation” (*Washington Post*, June 4, 2004).

Taken together with an apparent agreement between al-Sistani and the “firebrand” cleric Muqtada al-Sadr for the latter’s Madhi militia to leave Kufa and Najaf, this demand presages a potential shock for Bush Administration and Pentagon plans for the “war on terror.” Washington has insisted that coalition military troops would be needed in Iraq through at least January 2006 to ensure that terrorists or surviving Ba’athists did not seize power. This agreement diffuses a major source of resistance through internal Iraqi mechanisms, just as fighting in the Fallujah area ebbed after Iraqi-on-Iraqi consultations. Moreover, in what the Iraqis attribute to a U.S. initiative, nine factions with militias totaling 100,000 men have declared they will disburse their armed fighters over the next seven months to either re-integrate into civil society or become part of the centrally-controlled security forces. With a significant boost in trained fighters augmented by a continuing flow of new U.S.-trained recruits, the interim administration may succeed in expelling “foreign jihadists,” thus removing all pretenses for a continued U.S. presence or bases in Iraq beyond January 2005.



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In parallel letters from Secretary of State Colin Powell and Iraqi President Iyad Allawi to the Security Council, both sides pledged to consult, cooperate, and coordinate on mechanisms for security operations (*New York Times*, June 7, 2004). As positive as this sounds, the best of intentions can easily fall victim to the overcharged atmosphere of military action. And while everyone in power now insists it will not happen, should the U.S. and coalition forces be asked to leave, the very fact of the asking would so energize the Iraqi population that even the least hesitancy could spark real nation-wide upheaval.

In the end, Iraq really is all about electricity—not just material but psychic—or its absence and denial. In this light and no other the Iraqis may remember the United States in the early 21st century.

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