

Bush Administration Seeks UN Escape Hatch

By Ian Williams | June 3, 2004

The U.S. invaded Iraq waving the stars and stripes. It appears to be retreating under cover of the blue and white flag of the UN. The new draft resolution that the U.S. and Britain have submitted to the UN Security Council shows that the combination of the impending U.S. elections, Abu Ghraib torture pictures, the climb-downs with ex-Ba'athists in Fallujah and the Shi'a militia in Najaf, and the mounting U.S. casualty toll, all have put the U.S. in a very weak negotiating position with both the UN, and now the uppity Iraqi Governing Council (IGC).

Taken overall, the latest resolution panders less to the neoconservative ideologues in the Bush administration than was conceivable six months or a year ago, and by the time the newly proposed Iraqi government and Algeria, France, Germany Russia and the other Security Council members have finished, it will likely pander even less. Indeed, even UK Prime Minister Tony Blair is trying to chivvy the Americans into granting more expansive powers to the Iraqis.

Signs of Diplomatic Weakness

It is a measure of the diplomatic weakness of the United States that instead of its traditional role of stabbing the United Nations in the back, the Bush administration was itself wrongfooted by its former protégés in the IGC. It must have been some small comfort to the ideologues in the Pentagon that the UN was also taken by surprise by what could unkindly be called a stooges' rebellion.

The new draft now says explicitly that the Multi-National Force (MNF), as the U.S.-led military coalition in Iraq intends to camouflage itself, is in Iraq at the invitation of the interim Iraqi government and that its UN mandate has a sunset clause—it expires after twelve months, unless explicitly renewed. However, it can also be terminated earlier at the request of the Iraqi transitional government which takes over at the beginning of next year. The overt declaration that the forces will go if asked ends months of prevarication from Washington.

In fact, the new interim government has already said that it will ask the force to stay for the time being, but the details of their status and command and control need to be worked out between the Coalition and the new government, which is showing every sign of wanting more in the way of independence than anyone anticipated.

It is perhaps significant that while the transitional government that will be formed by the elections scheduled for January, 2005 has the right to ask the MNF to leave, the interim government does not, which could look like a serious diminution of sovereignty, but which British diplomats pass off as simply a pragmatic decision, since Iraqi forces would not be ready.

It will probably get backing for this from the other Security Council members who want assurances of public support for the new administration, and want to hear from them before rushing to agree with the draft resolution. The other members of the Security Council also want to hear from Lakhdar Brahimi and the new Iraqi administration before signing off on a resolution on the say-so of the Occupiers.

In fact, one cannot help suspecting that in addition to their genuine wish to help Iraq, the Council members are relishing some degree of revenge for Washington's previously arrogant stance.

According to the new text, Iraqi forces, military, police and border guards will operate under their own command and the Iraqi people will "decide their own political future and control their own natural



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resources”—which means that they own their oil, of course, but the revenues will still be paid into an internationally controlled fund until a new elected government takes over, or more precisely, for the next twelve months, or until the transitional government asks otherwise. Still buried and unremarked in the draft resolution by an obscure reference to previous decisions is the clause that pays five per cent of all Iraqi oil revenues as reparations to the compensation fund—in effect mostly to Kuwait.

Issues of Control

While the U.S. seems to be moving towards accepting overall political direction for the MNF from the new government, there is no way the U.S. military will accept any kind of “dual key” about responding if they come under attack. This could pose the new government some problems down the line unless the U.S. military gets access to supplies of sensitivity that have hitherto gone missing in action.

It may also lead to some diplomatic roadblocks because the U.S. is resisting incorporating the terms of any such agreement on direction of the forces explicitly in the resolution because of Pentagon phobias about admitting any command or control over its forces whatsoever, whether by the UN or by the Iraqis. The British envisage some type of Iraqi National Security Council that would work with the MNF to achieve this—but in pandering to the Pentagon, the U.S. diplomats are trying to leave the details in the letter which would be referred to in the main text.

It remains to be seen what will happen in the transition period, since the script was rewritten at the end of May. The whole purpose of involving the UN and Lakhdar Brahimi was to draw a line under the American occupation and its appointed administration. Their job was to baptize a new administration, guaranteed free of occupational sin.

The IGC Asserts Itself

The first sign that things were not going as planned was when Washington announced that Hussein Shahrstani was to be the new Prime Minister of Iraq. Having Washington announce his appointment

before Brahimi could send a clear signal to increasingly anti-American Iraqis that nothing had changed.

Therefore, it was hardly surprising that Shahrstani decided not to accept the nomination, but most observers outside were caught unawares when it was revealed that it was the other factions on the IGC who forced him to back down and thus caught both Bremer and Brahimi on the hop. When the IGC announced its own choice for Prime Minister, Ayad Allawi, no one was sure what right it had to do any such thing, since it was about to be dissolved as a token of the end of the American occupation. Then over the weekend, the IGC pretty much nominated all the other positions as well.

Taken by surprise by the “nomination,” Brahimi circumspectly announced that he “respected” the decision of the IGC to nominate Allawi, initially carefully avoiding either welcoming or recognizing him. Then within days, Brahimi took his list of the new government to the “respected” and, by now presumably recognized and welcomed, Allawi for blessing.

This was forthcoming because it was the IGC that had made all the major choices such as Ghazi Yawar as interim President. A tribal chieftain from the north of the country, Yawar has spent time in other tribal jurisdictions, like Washington and Saudi Arabia—and he beat the choice of Bremer and the Americans, Adnan Pachachi.

Since it was, after all, the U.S. occupation authorities that had nominated the IGC, its nomination of the new interim government could easily imply a direct lineal connection to collaboration. However, to be fair, the IGC was never simply a set of American stooges. Even at the beginning, its membership was marshaled together with the help of the late UN Special Representative Sergio Vieira de Mello who persuaded people to take positions on it who may well have refused a simple American invitation, and it has shown signs of increasing restiveness in the face of the occupiers’ ineptitude and arrogance.

Because of the IGC link, the new Allawi administration has to be even pushier in its demands on the U.S to show Iraqis that they are not American stool-pigeons. But even a convincing display of independ-

ence may not stop various groups in and out of the government from jockeying for power and influence in fairly lethal ways.

The Council members and doubtless the Iraqis themselves, are well aware that a re-elected President Bush could well take a less liberal attitude so they are trying to tie down the details as much as possible. Ironically, the best excuse the Bush administration would have for back-pedaling would be a dangerous security situation, whether provoked by U.S. military incompetence or indeed genuine terrorism of the kind that followed the U.S. into the country. However, the more independent the interim government is of the U.S., the less excuse there is for resistance fighters to attack.

The resolution, which will probably pass in some form within a week or so, offers an opportunity to take stock of what reality has done to the dreams of an empire held by the fantasists in the Pentagon and Vice President Dick Cheney's office. A little over a year ago, having unilaterally defied the UN and invaded Iraq, they were lining up Syria, Iran and others as potential subjects for pre-emptive invasion. Now, hard-pressed to maintain the number of troops it needs in Iraq, the administration is beating a retreat. It has negotiated deals with local war lords and has called upon the international community and the UN to help clear up the mess.

Since they only let reality impinge upon them in rare circumstances, like impending American elections, we cannot be sure that they will not be back for more. The Bush administration will almost certainly cite the final resolution as proof of its altruistic good intentions from the beginning. It is of course no such thing; it is a product of events on the ground and pressure from the world community, and they should not be allowed to take credit for it, anymore than they should be allowed to announce, as they almost certainly will try, that from July 1st, any American casualties in Iraq died for the United Nations.

But they died for George W. Bush and his administration.

(Ian Williams contributes frequently to Foreign Policy in Focus (online at www.fpif.org) on UN and international affairs.)

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