

Iraq—Two Years Later

By Stephen Zunes | March 23, 2005

In a series of articles written between June 2002 and February 2003, I predicted that if the United States invaded Iraq, it was highly unlikely that we would find any of the weapons of mass destruction or WMD programs that the Bush administration and the congressional leadership of both parties claimed Iraq possessed in their effort to justify an American takeover of that oil-rich country. I also predicted that no operational links between the Iraqi regime and al-Qaida would be found and that a U.S. invasion would encourage terrorism rather than discourage it. Finally, I predicted that we could find ourselves virtually isolated in the international community facing a bloody counter-insurgency war with no end in sight.

In the two years since the Bush administration went ahead and invaded Iraq anyway, I take little satisfaction in being right.

Neither U.S. military action nor the Iraqi elections held on January 30 have thus far done anything to calm the insurgency and have appeared to exacerbate ethnic tensions.

Since the U.S. invasion, tens of thousands of Iraqis—mostly civilians—have been killed. Malnutrition among children has doubled and childhood mortality has tripled. More than one million refugees have fled the country to avoid the car bombs, assassinations, kidnappings, martial law, deadly roadblocks, and artillery and air strikes from American forces. Lines for fuel can be days long, there are widespread shortages of food and medicine, prices for food and other necessities have greatly inflated, and over half the population is unemployed. In short, a lot more people are suffering and dying in the two years since the U.S. invasion than in the two years prior to the U.S. invasion. And, as long as that is the case, the insurgency will probably continue.

Despite the largely successful efforts of the Bush administration to cover up the extent of U.S. torture of Iraqi prisoners, it now appears that the revelations of abuse in the Abu Ghraib prison were just the tip of the iceberg. Given that the overwhelming majority

of detainees are not terrorists or guerrillas, but simply ordinary young Iraqi men arrested in massive sweeps by U.S. occupation forces, popular outrage at the United States has grown enormously.

The torture of prisoners, the use of heavy weaponry against crowded urban neighborhoods, the shooting at cars filled with civilians at checkpoints, and related actions against innocents have done little to win over the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people. The evidence is growing that the United States is creating insurgents faster than our Army can kill them.

Given the tribal and family ties among Iraqis that transcend sectarian differences, fears of civil war between Sunni Arabs and Shiite Arabs have probably been exaggerated, in part as a means to justify the ongoing U.S. occupation. There is no question, however, that the U.S. invasion and occupation have worsened ethnic divisions. For example, the United States removed large numbers of the mostly secular urban professional and managerial classes who worked for the old Iraqi state and re-established an interim government based along religious and ethnic lines, where sectarian, ethnic, and tribal biases, as well as nepotism, have plagued efforts to rebuild government ministries. In addition, U.S. forces have utilized Kurdish fighters in its battles against Arab insurgents, increasing tensions between those two communities.

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The Costs of War at Home

In addition to more than 1,500 American deaths and record numbers of soldiers coming home with amputations, blindness, and other serious injuries, the widespread psychological trauma from fighting this kind of war has been taking its toll on our soldiers as well.

Polls now show that a full 59% of Americans believe that U.S. troops out should be pulled out of Iraq within a year.

Despite this, the U.S. House of Representatives voted in mid-March by an overwhelming 388-43 majority to support an \$81 billion supplemental spending bill, much of it to further prosecute the war in Iraq. This came just after revelations that U.S. administrators cannot account for more than nine billion dollars they spent in Iraq. The Center for Strategic and International Studies reported that only 27% of the reconstruction funds have gone to help Iraqis, with the rest going to security, waste, fraud, overhead, and profits.

The January 30 Elections

Despite the many problems and limitations of the January 30 Iraqi election, it was a remarkable testament to the Iraqi people's desire for self-determination and for an accountable government. Two of the country's three major ethno-religious communities came out en masse against great odds in an impressive attempt to establish at least some semblance of self-determination after decades of dictatorial rule followed by more than a year and a half of U.S. military occupation.

The Iraqi election had few international observers, experienced widespread irregularities, was boycotted in a number of key provinces, and was held under the rule of a foreign occupying power that had imposed the electoral laws and selected the electoral

commission that oversaw it. As President George W. Bush recently said, in reference to Lebanon, "You cannot hold free and fair elections under foreign military occupation."

However, despite not meeting most internationally recognized criteria for a legitimate election, it was a certainly an improvement over the utter lack of electoral democracy under Saddam Hussein's dictatorship, and the opportunity to participate in the process was clearly welcomed by most Iraqis.

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Indeed, the fact that Iraq had a direct election for its National Assembly—which will be charged with writing the country's new constitution—came despite, rather than because of, the efforts of President George W. Bush.

It should be remembered that the Bush administration, during most of the first year of the U.S. occupation,

strongly opposed holding direct elections. Initially, the United States supported the installation of Ahmed Chalabi or some other compliant pro-American exile as leader of Iraq. When it became evident that that would be unacceptable, U.S. officials tried to keep their viceroy, Paul Bremer, in power indefinitely. When it became clear that Iraqis and the international community would not tolerate that option either, the Bush administration pushed for a caucus system where appointees of American appointees would choose the new government and write the constitution. When that was met in January 2004 by hundreds of thousands of Iraqis taking to the streets protesting the U.S. proposal and demanding a popular vote, only then did President Bush give in and reluctantly agree to allow direct elections to move forward.

Instead of going ahead with the election in May 2004 as called for by Ayatollah Sistani and other Iraqi leaders, U.S. officials postponed the elections until January 2005. As a result of this delay, the security situation continued to deteriorate so that by the time the elections finally took place, the large and important Sunni Arab minority was largely unable or unwilling to participate. In most Sunni-dominated parts of the country, it was physically unsafe to go to the polls due to threats by insurgents. In addition, the major Sunni parties—angered at the enormous numbers of civilians killed in recent months in U.S. counter-insurgency operations—had called for a boycott.

Parties opposed to the ongoing U.S. military presence in their country won the overwhelming majority of the votes in January's election.

Exit polls showed a clear majority cited getting the U.S. military out as a major impetus for voting. The pro-Washington slate led by the U.S.-appointed Prime Minister Ayad Allawi—despite enormous advantages in funding and organization—came in a poor third. A centerpiece of the platform of the United Iraqi Alliance, which won over half of the seats in the new National Assembly, is for a timetable for the withdrawal of foreign forces from their country.

The Sunnis and Shiites are united in their desire for U.S. forces to leave; their differences are primarily tactical. Most Sunnis believe that any election under foreign military occupation is illegitimate and the withdrawal of U.S. forces must be forced by military means. By contrast, most Shiites have decided that the best way to get the Americans out is through elections, which would make possible a legitimate Iraqi government that could then negotiate a phased withdrawal.

Establishing a Credible Government

Six weeks following the Iraqi elections, no government has yet been formed, with the initial hopes expressed immediately following the elections dissolving into growing disillusionment. The U.S.-backed interim constitution requires supermajorities in order to govern and the Kurdish alliance, which won more than a quarter of the vote, is pressing hard for an autonomous Kurdistan, the restoration of Kurdish

property rights in the northern city of Kirkuk, and the right to maintain a separate armed force. Until that time when a new government can be agreed upon, the U.S.-appointed interim government remains in power.

Once the new government is formed, there will be strong pressure from Iraqis to get U.S. forces out of Iraq soon, in order to prove to the large numbers of Iraqis who sup-

port the insurgents that they are not just a puppet regime of foreign occupiers. At the same time, because of the heightened insurgency resulting from the U.S. postponement of the election, it may be very difficult for them to survive the ongoing armed uprising in the Sunni heartland with such a small number of adequately trained and dependable armed forces of its own. As a result, it appears they will be forced to allow American troops to remain.

The new government is faced not only with an insurgency—led primarily by a combination of supporters of the old regime, secular Arab nationalists, and Sunni Islamists—but with a massive crime wave, a lack of reliable electricity and fuel, rising ethnic tensions, and extensive damage to the civilian infrastructure from U.S. bombing. Perhaps emblematic of the challenges facing Iraq, the March 17 *New York Times* described how many Iraqis were unable to watch the historic opening session of the newly elected national assembly because there was no electricity or because their televisions had been stolen.

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Indeed, there are still serious questions as to whether the United States will even allow the Iraqi people to fully exercise their right to self-government.

The platform offered by the victorious United Iraqi Alliance calls for the state to guarantee a job for every able-bodied Iraqi, to support home construction, to cancel debts and reparations, and use the nation's oil wealth for the country's economic development. This is a direct challenge to the neoliberal economic policies imposed by U.S. occupation authorities, such as the decision to privatize much of the country's public assets, instigate a flat tax of 15%, and allow for unrestricted foreign investment and repatriation of profits. However, most of these economic policies were imposed under Bremer's Transitional Administrative Laws, which are almost impossible for the new government to overturn.

In addition, U.S. citizens in Iraq continue to enjoy extraterritorial rights, in that they cannot be prosecuted in Iraq for any crime, no matter how serious. U.S. military forces—numbering over 150,000—can move and attack anywhere in the country without the government's consent. Americans have prominent positions in virtually every Iraqi government ministry and largely control their budgets. U.S. appointees with terms lasting through 2009 are in charge of “control commissions” that oversee fiscal policy, the media, and other important regulatory areas. Similarly, U.S. appointees also dominate the judiciary, which has the power to overturn any law passed by the newly elected government.

There is little question that the most powerful political institution in Iraq—in terms of resources, organization, and military power—is the United States mission and it will likely remain so for the indefinite future.

Iraq's new leadership was elected in a largely democratic process and clearly enjoys the support of large sectors of the Iraqi population. Contrary to charges by some critics, they are not puppets of the United States. However, unless the Bush administration is willing to allow this democratically elected government to exercise genuine sovereignty and thereby

prove its legitimacy, it will not bring this devastated country any closer to peace and stability.

Dealing with the Insurgency

Since the United States disbanded Iraq's military and security forces soon after its 2003 invasion, the vacuum has been filled by scores of armed militias. The United Nations estimates as many as 43 different insurgent groups, ranging from loyalists to the old regime, radical Islamists, independent nationalists, foreign terrorists, and others.

The high rate of civilian casualties—inevitable in counter-insurgency warfare waged by a modern army—has resulted in a growing number of recruits to the insurgents' campaign, not surprising in the largely tribal Sunni Arab regions, where vengeance remains a powerful social ethic. The number of armed fighters and their active supporters may now total as many as 200,000. The U.S. destruction this past November of more than two-thirds of the city of Fallujah, once the home of 300,000 people, was not only a war crime and a moral travesty, it was strategic disaster, spreading insurgent operations to neighboring provinces, where they now control all or parts of a number of towns and cities. Most of the roads leading in and out of Baghdad are impassable.

With four more members of the “coalition of the willing,” the Dutch, Polish, Ukrainian, and Italian militaries, pulling out, the United States and Great Britain have found themselves increasingly isolated. Few of the token foreign forces in the “coalition” saw any combat anyway, restricting their activities to con-

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struction, medical assistance, and other aid. The most significant forces outside the American and British militaries have been mercenaries, including thousands of Americans and British military veterans, as well as South Africans, Serbs, and Nepalese Gurkhas.

The tactics of insurgents are alienating growing numbers of Iraqis. With American forces more difficult to attack, holed up in their heavily defended and fortified bases, insurgents have increasingly attacked undefended civilian targets. At the same time, the Iraqi Ministry of Health has estimated that American forces have killed almost three times as many Iraqi citizens as did the insurgents.

Meanwhile, the U.S.-trained Iraqi army has had the propensity to desert in large numbers when ordered to fight other Iraqis. For those who do fight, the Iraqi army has developed a reputation of being even more ruthless and trigger-happy than the Americans, with the additional problem of widespread corruption at all levels.

What Next in Iraq?

Given the strong nationalist and Islamist identity of most Iraqis and the widespread resentment of the United States, it is hard to imagine a truly representative government that would support U.S. military and economic goals in the Middle East. While not admitting it publicly, it is becoming increasingly clear that Iraq will either have a democratic government or a pro-American government. It cannot have both.

Though he is not seeking a top post, it is widely expected that the most powerful figure in the new government will be the senior Shiite cleric Abdelaziz Hakim, head of the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, who collaborated closely with the Islamic leadership in Iran during his 20 years of exile in that country. A longtime critic of U.S. policy in the Middle East, Hakim was bypassed by U.S. occupation forces when they chose Iraq's interim leaders after the invasion and occupation of the country in

March 2003. While not likely to try to implement direct clerical rule, there is little question that Hakim and his followers envision state based upon a rather hard line interpretation of Islamic law.

Their likely coalition partners are the Kurdistan Alliance which, while traditionally more pro-American and not as strongly Islamic-identified as the Shiite coalition, is led by Jalal Talabani, who is also close to the Iranian government.

Despite claims by the Bush administration that a democratic Iraq would be friendly to American interests in the Middle East and be good for Israel, there are good reasons to think otherwise. For example, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution, the largest bloc of the UIA, is close to the radical Lebanese Hizbullah and their rallies have included chants of "Death to Israel!"

In effect, the Bush administration is currently putting American lives on the line to defend an incipient anti-American and anti-Israeli government.

Meanwhile, Iraqi calls for a withdrawal of American forces are growing. According to the January 31, 2005 issue of *Newsweek*, polls show that "an ever larger majority of Iraqis want the Americans to leave."

Despite this, President Bush declared in his State of the Union address that U.S. forces will stay in Iraq until it becomes "a country that is democratic, representative of all its people, at peace with its neighbors, and able to defend itself," which even optimistic observers believe could take years. As a result, the United States may try to remain in Iraq indefinitely in order to force concessions from the new government. Given that the U.S. decision to delay the elections has created a situation where the new government is dependent on the United States for its survival, this leaves the Bush administration a lot of leverage.

There are some indications that a deal may be in the works where, in return for Washington allowing the Iraqi government to impose its ultra-conservative interpretations of Islamic law, the government would accede to some of the neoliberal economic policies favored by Washington, which Naomi Klein in *The Nation* has labeled the “oil for women program.”

At the same time, it is doubtful that the millions of Shiites who elected the government on its left-leaning economic policy and its anti-occupation stance would allow such an arrangement to go into effect. And, given the difficulty U.S. forces have had with the insurgency among the Sunni minority, dealing with a full-scale insurgency by the Shiite majority would be utterly impossible. The people of Iraq also have a lot of leverage.

As a result, there are reasons to believe that the Bush administration has largely given up on the grand designs the neoconservatives originally envisioned for a post-Saddam Iraq and that they want to cut their losses and get out as soon as possible. If so, it would mean that the primary reason the administration insists that U.S. forces remain for the time being is that a victory by the insurgents would be far worse for U.S. interests in the region and that the political consequences of such a defeat would be enormous. The scaling-back of the more ambitious aspects of the economic agenda is apparent as well: For example, the British Broadcasting Corporation has revealed that the United States had initially planned to sell off much of Iraq’s oil to American corporations. However, U.S. oil companies—worried about Russian-style corruption in such a privatization scheme, and fearing an Iraqi backlash that would only increase attacks upon oil installations—have instead successfully argued for a state-owned oil company that would deal with them on friendly terms.

What Should U.S. Policy Be at this Point?

Given the choice between accepting the status quo and calling for an immediate U.S. withdrawal, the least bad option would probably be the latter. Those two options should not be the only choices, however.

The major problem with an “Out Now!” position is that the armed insurgency among the Sunni minority is strong enough and the new Iraqi army is weak enough that the new government could soon find itself in jeopardy without U.S. forces. Only about 5,000 trained and dependable Iraqi troops have emerged out of the 120,000-man army projected by Bush administration officials. Only about one-third of the 135,000 of the country’s policemen bother to report for duty.

The Bush administration’s desperate effort to try to control the political and economic direction of Iraq by postponing national self-determination allowed a narrow window of opportunity to pass.

While the ideological orientation of the armed insurgency is diverse, some of its stronger elements—who would likely dominate in the event they seized power—are quite fascistic. In the event that hard-line Sunni Islamists and/or pro-Saddam elements took over, the Shiite militias would likely be mobilized and then there really could be a nasty civil war, complete with massacres and ethnic cleansing on a major scale. In the chaos, the Kurds could make a clean break with the deteriorating Iraqi state by declaring independence, prompting Turkish intervention and the renewal of the Turko-Kurdish war.

Had the United States allowed for direct elections earlier, when the insurgency was much smaller and weaker, the new Iraqi government would probably be more broad-based and could have prevailed; U.S. forces would have probably all returned home by now. Unfortunately, in the Bush administration’s desperate effort to try to control the political and economic direction of Iraq by postponing national self-determination, that window of opportunity has passed.

Are there any alternatives other than maintaining the current catastrophic counter-insurgency military campaign by U.S. forces and advocating a precipitous American withdrawal from Iraq?

While not as simple a slogan as “Out Now!” perhaps the best option for the anti-war movement would be to advocate the following:

- an immediate end to all offensive American military operations and a U.S. pullout from population centers;
- the repeal of Bremer’s Transitional Administrative Laws imposed under the U.S. occupation, including those privatizing Iraq’s public assets;
- all reconstruction money should be sent through the United Nations and monitored carefully;
- construction on all long-term U.S. military facilities should cease and plans for permanent U.S. military bases be rescinded;
- the training of new Iraqi armed forces should be expedited, with special attention given to respect for internationally recognized human rights;
- a generous U.S. aid package, with no strings attached, should be offered to Iraq to rebuild what the United States has destroyed.

No matter what the alternative becomes, it is crucial that U.S. policy in Iraq continue to be scrutinized and challenged. U.S. elected officials who continue to support the current policy should be held accountable. It should be clear at this point that the Bush administration and its supporters in Congress have made one disastrous decision after another and cannot be trusted to do any better in the future. As a result, even though the message is not as clear as it was a little over two years ago when we could simply say “Do not invade Iraq!,” voices of dissent and reason are needed more than ever.

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