

Iraq One Year Later

By Stephen Zunes | March 2004

A full year after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, while the tyrannical rule of Saddam Hussein is over, the killing continues and the quality of life for most Iraqis has actually deteriorated. Meanwhile, the United States is continuing to sacrifice lives and money in an enterprise for which the original rationales—eliminating Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and its support for the al Qaeda terrorist network—are now widely acknowledged to be false.

This essay offers a brief overview of the situation on the ground and the U.S. response to it. The violence in reaction to the U.S. occupation has consisted of both urban guerrilla warfare against U.S. and other occupation forces, led primarily by Baathist and other nationalist militias, and terrorism against Iraqi and foreign civilians, presumably led by domestic or foreign radical Islamists. There is also small-scale and potentially large-scale nonviolent resistance, particularly in the Shiite community.

Armed Resistance to U.S. Occupation Forces

The guerrilla attacks, while responsible for fewer deaths overall, have been the primary concern for U.S. officials. Though dismissed simply as supporters of the old regime, their support appears to be much deeper. A CIA report at the end of last year acknowledged that “there are thousands in the resistance—and not just hardcore Baathists” and that “the resistance is broad, strong, and getting stronger.”¹

Much of the armed resistance appears to be under the control of Baathists, but—with the capture and killing of most senior Baath officials loyal to Saddam Hussein—they appear to be mid-level Baathists who were more independent and not saddled with the baggage of the old regime. For example, Samarra—which is a center of anti-occupation resistance—was also a center for anti-Saddam elements of the Baath Party.²

To use an analogy from the Vietnam War, while the National Liberation Front (NLF, or “Viet Cong”) was certainly controlled by the Communist Party and most of its leadership was communists, the vast majority of its fighters were ordinary peasants motivated by nationalism.

As in Vietnam, the primary victims of U.S. counter-insurgency operations appear to be civilians, particularly as a result of the bombing and shelling of crowded residential areas. Human rights groups have observed that the mere presumption that fighters may be hiding in a particular area is not enough to legally justify a military response when civilians are in the area, according to international law.

Also as in Vietnam, such tactics are motivated in part by racism. For example, the *New York Times* quoted Captain Todd Brown, a company commander with the Fourth Infantry Division, as saying “You have to understand the Arab mind. The only thing they understand is force.”³

Armed engagements with insurgents are not always reported accurately. For example, following a three-hour battle in the town of Samarra, where U.S. forces reported that fifty-four guerrillas and no civilians were killed, local doctors and other civilian eyewitnesses spoke of minimal military deaths and widespread civilian fatalities.⁴ U.S. forces reportedly shelled and shot up civilian homes, a mosque, a kindergarten, pharmaceutical plant, and a minibus



carrying Iranian pilgrims, as well as crushed cars with their tanks.

American responses to attacks have not been limited to exchanges of fire with insurgents, targeting communications or confiscating weapons, but punishing entire cities and neighborhoods for acts committed by a group of locals involved in attacks against occupation forces. In the words of Brigadier General Dempsey, the goal of such operations is “to communicate to the enemy that the cost of actions against [the U.S. occupation forces] is high.”⁵ Often, they are not even locals, deliberately making attacks from neighborhoods and towns away from where their families live, so the retribution will fall elsewhere.⁶

Another American officer, Colonel Sasaman, stated, “With a heavy dose of fear and violence, and a lot of money for projects, I think we can convince these people that we are here to help them.”⁷

Such heavy use of force has not only failed to achieve the intended results, but has also contributed to ongoing U.S. casualties in patrols by sizable contingents of American forces. Seeking to minimize young Americans coming home in body bags in an election year, the Bush administration, as of November, began emphasizing the use of Special Forces to make pre-emptive tactics.

Tactics by U.S. occupation forces in responses have included the demolition of houses, cordoning off whole towns and neighborhoods with razor wire, and detaining relatives of suspected guerrillas in hopes that insurgents will turn themselves in.

One American adviser described it: “We’re going to have to play their game. Guerrilla versus guerrillas. Terrorism versus terrorism. We’ve got to scare the Iraqis into submission.”⁸ Similarly, a former U.S. intelligence officer has acknowledged “This is basically an assassination program. That is what is being conceptualized here. This is a hunter-killer team.”⁹

In occupied Palestinian territories Israel has also used such tactics, which have been recognized as illegal and have been subjected to a series of critical UN Security Council resolutions. Senator John Kerry and other Democratic leaders in Congress have vigorously defended such actions, however, on the grounds that Israel was targeting families of terrorists and otherwise responding to attacks against civilian populations. The targets of U.S. attacks, however, don’t appear to be primarily terrorists responsible for bombings against civilians, but rather guerrillas targeting occupation forces.

In either case, such tactics are a violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which strictly prohibits such attacks.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld repeatedly criticized the former Special Forces Commander, Air Force General Charles Holland, “for his reluctance to authorize commando raids without specific ... intelligence.”¹⁰ In his place he has promoted, as one

of the key planners of these operations, Lieutenant General William (Jerry) Boykin, who has declared that Muslims are a Satanic force that “want to destroy us as a nation, and he wants to destroy us as a Christian army” because “we are a nation of believers.” Furthermore, he declares that Bush was “not elected” president but was “appointed by God.”¹¹

The United States has brought in Israeli commandos and intelligence units to train these forces at Fort Bragg, North Carolina; some Israelis have been brought into Iraq itself as military “consultants;” and some Americans are going to Israel to observe their occupation forces in action.¹² The hawkish Israeli military expert Martin Van Creveld has noted, however, that such tactics have not worked for Israel and will not likely work for the United States, either: “They are already doing things that we have been doing for years to no avail. The Americans are coming here to try to mimic all kinds of techniques, but it’s not going to do them any good.”¹³ Indeed, it may be even less successful since, while Israel’s occupation

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of the Palestinians is based on a combination of security concerns and territorial expansion, the United States claims its occupation of Iraq is to liberate Iraqi citizens. If such intimidation does not work on your perceived enemies, it is even less likely to work on those whom you want to be your friends.

It is also ironic that the United States began working with the Israelis and adopting such tactics just as four former heads of Shin Bet—Israel's security agency—went on record condemning their country's policies as counter-productive.

There has been little concern about the use of such tactics from Democratic lawmakers. Indeed, top Democratic members of Congress—including House Minority leader Nancy Pelosi and presumptive Democratic Party presidential nominee John Kerry—have attacked President Bush from the right for criticizing Israel's assassination policies. As a result, it would be hard for them to raise objections when such tactics are used for the purpose of protecting American troops.

Just as the ruling elites of medieval Europe used members of the Jewish community as money-lenders and tax collectors, the United States is now using the Israelis to help them with their dirty work.

Similarly, just as the United States used former collaborators with German and Japanese occupiers to help crush leftist insurgencies in the late 1940s after having "liberated" them, U.S. occupation forces have assembled teams made up of the upper ranks of Saddam Hussein's brutal intelligence services to infiltrate the insurgency.¹⁴ A CIA station chief acknowledged that the U.S. was "tapping into them. We have to resuscitate Iraqi intelligence, holding our nose" and have Special Forces and CIA operatives "break down doors and take them out."¹⁵

A Pentagon adviser has called hits "pre-emptive manhunting,"¹⁶ and it appears to have a striking resemblance to Operation Phoenix in South Vietnam, which resulted in the assassination of 20,000 to 40,000 Vietnamese, ostensibly connected to the NLF, though many were targeted because of private grievances.

With the counter-insurgency efforts led by an anti-Islamic Christian fundamentalist general with the support from some of the nastiest elements of Israeli occupation forces and Saddam's intelligence services, it is not surprising that the U.S. occupation is having a hard time winning Iraqi hearts and minds.

Indeed, the repression against Iraqi civilians through counter-insurgency operations by U.S. occupation forces is fueling a backlash, effectively creating resistance fighters faster than they can be killed. Milt Bearden, former chief of CIA operations in Afghanistan during the 1980s declares, "For every mujahedeen killed or hauled off in raids by Soviet troops in Afghanistan, a revenge group of perhaps a half-dozen members of his family took up arms. Sadly, this same rule probably applies in Iraq."¹⁷

The Terrorist Threat

The Bush administration has tried to link the very real threat to American security from mega-terrorist groups like al Qaeda to phony threats originating in Iraq. Not only has President Bush tried to link the terrorism that has grown out of the post-invasion chaos in Iraq to the devastating al Qaeda attacks on the United States two years ago, he has depicted all the current violence against Americans and other foreigners in Iraq as part of this terrorist threat.

For example, President Bush has failed to distinguish between the car bombings and other terrorist attacks against Iraqi civilians and international relief workers with guerrilla attacks by the Iraqi resistance against U.S. occupation forces. As tragic as the deaths of American soldiers may be, the Fourth Geneva Convention—to which the United States is a signatory—recognizes that a people under foreign military occupation do have the right to militarily engage armed, uniformed occupation forces. This is not the same as terrorism, which refers to attacks deliberately targeted against unarmed civilians and is universally recognized as a war crime. It is therefore terribly misleading to try to convince the American public that these two phenomena are the same.

President Bush has also failed to differentiate between the increasingly disparate elements behind the attacks. Some of the violence may indeed come

from those who have some connection with al Qaeda who have infiltrated Iraq since the invasion; some are supporters of Saddam Hussein's former regime; some are Iraqi Islamists; still others are independent Iraqi nationalists who opposed the old regime but also oppose the U.S. occupation; still others may be foreign fighters who see driving American occupiers from Iraq as an act of pan-Islamic solidarity comparable to driving Soviet occupiers from Afghanistan.

In any case, President Bush now declares that a successful American-led pacification of the anti-occupation resistance in Iraq would be an "essential victory in the war on terror." In linking the legitimate international struggle against al Qaeda with the illegitimate U.S. occupation of Iraq, it becomes possible for the administration to justify the president's determination to "spend what is necessary" in controlling this oil-rich country and to depict those in the United States and elsewhere who oppose the occupation as being soft on terrorism.¹⁸

It is noteworthy that only after it has become apparent that Iraq did not have the WMD programs the Bush administration had claimed, President Bush now says that the U.S. occupation of Iraq is necessary since that country has become "the central front" of the "war on terror." In a nationally televised address last fall, President Bush declared that "the surest way to avoid attacks on our own people is to engage the enemy where he lives and plans. We are fighting that enemy in Iraq ... today so that we do not meet him again on our own streets, in our own cities."¹⁹

There appears to be no evidence, however, that those Iraqis currently fighting U.S. occupation forces in their own country actually want to somehow sneak into the United States to kill American civilians. Indeed, no Iraqis have ever been known to commit an act of terrorism against Americans on American soil.

The president's statement is essentially a retread of the line used by supporters of the Vietnam War that "If we don't fight them over there, we will have to fight them here." However, more than 28 years after the Communist victory in Vietnam, the United States has not had to fight the Vietnamese on American streets and there is no indication that we ever will. The Iraqis, like the Vietnamese 35 years ago, are fighting Americans because U.S. troops are in their country and, like the Vietnamese, will presumably stop fighting Americans once U.S. troops leave their country.

Iraqi support for international terrorists—primarily small radical nationalist groups, particularly Palestinian—peaked in the 1980s (when Saddam Hussein's regime was supported by the United States) and has been largely non-existent since the early 1990s. Though Iraq was not a hotbed of terrorism for the last dozen years of Saddam's rule, it is now.

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The destruction of Saddam Hussein's tightly controlled police state by U.S. forces opened up the country as a haven for the world's terrorists. The U.S. invasion resulted in the replacement of a highly centralized authority to the kind of weak state that the Bush administration, in its September 2002 National Security Strategy, noted was a breeding ground for terrorists: an inability to meet the basic needs of its citizens or control its borders. Furthermore, a senior U.S. counter-terrorism official has acknowledged that "an American invasion of Iraq is already being used as a recruitment tool by al Qaeda and other groups."²⁰ Similarly, Richard Clarke, a former senior White House counter-terrorism official noted, "Fighting Iraq had little to do with fighting the war on terrorism, until we made it so."

According to Jessica Stern of Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, "We're inspiring terrorism. The Bush administration didn't seem to have anticipated the extent to which terrorists would be drawn into Iraq and the extent to

which they would be inspired by our occupation to attack elsewhere.”²¹

No Light at the End of the Tunnel?

Even if some sort of Iraqi government emerges in July, it may mean little in terms of the military commitment of the United States. President Bush may be able to claim that the United States is no longer an occupying army but there at the invitation of the legitimate government of Iraq. The fact is, however, that whatever government emerges in July will be directly or indirectly appointed by the United States, which illegally invaded and occupied the country. It is less important whether the occupier sees its presence as an occupation than it does the people of the country itself. The Americans may have declared that their presence in Vietnam was at the request of the government of South Vietnam and the Soviets may have declared that their presence in Afghanistan was at the request of the government of Afghanistan, but as long as the people of a given country see them as a foreign occupying army, it matters little whether the government they install “invites” them to stay.

While it would be a mistake to believe that U.S. forces will successfully crush the Iraqi resistance in short order, it would also be a mistake to assume that the resistance will grow significantly or drive the American occupation forces out. The United States has several advantages: U.S. forces have access to sophisticated surveillance technology, which far surpasses earlier counter-insurgency campaigns, that can track down and root out resistance cells. The resistance does not have mountains and jungles in which to hide, nor an outside source of arms and support. The paranoid “snitch culture” from years of totalitarian rule makes it difficult for insurgents to create trustworthy underground networks. The use of terrorism by some resistance forces—which has primarily harmed Iraqi civilians—has alienated huge segments of the population from the resistance as a whole.

On the other hand, U.S. occupation forces have killed far more Iraqi civilians—albeit accidentally in most cases—than have the terrorists, and the occupation itself is extremely unpopular.

The violence in central part of the country, however, may not be the biggest obstacle to U.S. designs to create a stable, pro-American Iraq.

Shiite happens

The eventual undoing of the occupation may be less a result of the guerrilla movement against U.S. occupation forces, murders of alleged collaborators and foreign nationals, or terrorist attacks against civilians, than mass noncooperation, particularly from Iraq’s Shiite majority, who dominate the southern part of the country and were brutally suppressed by Saddam Hussein’s Sunni-dominated regime.

While Sunni (orthodox) Islam, whose adherents are the vast majority of the world’s Muslims, is egalitarian in structure, Shia Islam, whose adherents are the majority in Iraq, has a hierarchical structure. The ayatollahs—comparable in many respects to Roman Catholic cardinals—wield an enormous amount of influence, particularly in authoritarian societies where other forms of organization were either controlled by the government or brutally suppressed.

In Iran during the late 1970s, as the brutal U.S.-backed regime of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi was collapsing, local Shiite leaders were able to organize committees to create a kind of parallel government that was able to fill the void when the Shah fled into exile in January 1979, eclipsing the secular and independent Islamic elements.

As the Sunni-dominated parts of central Iraq struggle to restore civil order and basic services a full year after the devastating American invasion, the Shiite-dominated towns and cities of southern Iraq—as well as the Shiite neighborhoods of Baghdad and other cities in the center of the country—are functioning relatively well, in some cases with the blessings of U.S. occupation forces and in other cases independently. As a result, it is not surprising that the political capital of Shiite leaders is growing, as are demands for direct elections.

U.S. occupation forces have successfully postponed direct national elections on the grounds of ongoing logistical problems resulting from the disorder in many parts of the country. However, the United

States has also been unwilling to proceed with local and regional elections in Shiite areas, where few of these logistical problems appear to be a factor. Needless to say, this is creating enormous resentment at U.S. occupation forces from those whom the Bush administration assumed—due to years of oppression by Saddam Hussein—would be among their strongest supporters.

Following centuries of rule by others—the Ottomans, the British, the Hashemites, and the Baathists—the Shiite majority believe it is now their time to rule. As a result, there is resentment at U.S.-led efforts to restrict their power and influence by setting up a system that allows minorities a disproportionate degree of influence. While the establishment of an Iraqi Constitution that creates some sort of federal system guaranteeing the rights of ethnic minorities may indeed be appropriate, it nevertheless has led to some resentment by the Shiites who never had such protections or self-governance when they were out of power. (To use an analogous situation in U.S. politics, it would be similar to the situation in some American cities where, just as African-Americans are on the verge of becoming the electoral majority, the city council decides to switch from at-large representation to district representation and devolves power away from city hall.)

Already, Ayatollah Sistani and other Shiite leaders have been talking of massive nonviolent civil disobedience and the creation of their own alternative governing structures, which the vast majority of Iraqi Shiites would likely support. While U.S. occupation forces may ultimately be successful in crushing the armed Sunni insurgency in central Iraq, they may find—like the Shah’s well-equipped army—they are unable to stop hundreds of thousands of unarmed people in the streets who refuse to recognize their authority.

This does not mean that Shiite-led governance in Iraq—locally, regionally, or nationally—will evolve into the kind of totalitarian theocracy that came in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution. Shiite politics in Iraq, as elsewhere, contain progressive and moderate elements along with reactionary currents. The longer legitimate demands for democratic self-governance are relegated to the back burner by U.S. occupation forces—as the U.S.-backed Shah repeatedly postponed political liberalization—the more likely the extremist elements will gain ascendancy.

Conclusion

Despite these problems, there are surprisingly few prominent American political figures advocating an American withdrawal or even turning over Iraqi administration to the United Nations. Even former presidential contender Howard Dean, whose anti-war positions led him to be criticized by Senator Kerry and other pro-invasion Democrats, argued that now that U.S. forces have invaded Iraq, they should stay.

At the same time, while the situation could fall short of the unmitigated disaster many war opponents have predicted, the problems are serious and will not go away for some time to come.

It is no less important than it was prior to the invasion for the Bush administration’s lies to be exposed, the illegality and immorality of its actions be challenged, and realistic alternatives to the policy be brought forward.

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ENDNOTES

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