

The U.S. and Post-War Iraq

By Stephen Zunes | May 2003

There has been a disturbing degree of triumphalism following the overthrow—perhaps “evaporation” is a better word—of Saddam Hussein’s regime in the face of invading American forces. Even putting aside the appropriateness of this kind of gloating in the face of such death and destruction—including thousands of civilian casualties—it is striking that few people are asking whether the U.S. or the rest of the world is safer now as a result of this overwhelming American military victory.

Operation Iraqi Freedom has about as much to do with freedom as *Sports Illustrated’s* annual swimsuit issue has to do with marketing swimwear: it is little more than an afterthought, a rationalization, and a cover for the hegemonic designs of the Bush administration and its Republican and Democratic supporters in Congress.

Yet the other rationalizations simply did not have much credibility. The supposed threat to American and regional security from the much-talked-about Iraqi arsenal of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) appears to have been a ruse. No such weapons have been found thus far, likely validating the assessment of many independent strategic analysts, key Iraqi defectors, and former chief UNSCOM weapons inspector Scott Ritter that Iraq’s WMD program had been effectively dismantled.

Likewise, no significant Iraqi link to the al Qaeda network has been established. Even before the invasion, Bush administration claims of Iraqi backing for terrorist groups contradicted prior assessments by the State Department and various U.S. intelligence agencies. Now, despite the capture of many thousands of Iraqi documents and the interrogation of Iraqi intelligence officials, there appears to have been no signifi-

cant Iraqi support for terrorist groups for more than a decade.

There was never any debate about the repressive nature of Saddam Hussein’s regime and the genuine relief that many Iraqis feel regarding the end of the pervasive climate of fear that had gripped the country for a generation. At the same time, it is significant that Iraqi celebrations over the regime’s collapse have been relatively muted. A few hundred celebrants in a city of five million should not be portrayed as representing the sentiments of the population as a whole. Indeed, outside of some Kurdish areas of Iraq, there has not been much gratitude expressed by the population in response to the U.S. invasion. Though some American analysts have drawn analogies to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the overthrow of the communist regimes of Eastern Europe, those 1989 celebrations were much larger and more enthusiastic. There is a big difference between tearing down the statues of an ousted dictator yourself and having it done by an invading army.

Distrust of the U.S.

Even putting aside the tens of thousands of Iraqis who have engaged in anti-American demonstrations in recent weeks—some of which



have been met by gunfire from U.S. occupation forces—there is a pervasive sense of ambiguity among ordinary Iraqis regarding the U.S. invasion and occupation. What few Americans are willing to recognize at this stage is the fact that most Iraqis—including strong opponents of Saddam Hussein’s regime—simply do not trust the United States.

Such mistrust is not unfounded. Consider the following:

- Washington backed Saddam Hussein during the height of his repression in the 1980s, concealing Iraqi atrocities—such as the chemical weapons attack against Halabja and other Kurdish towns—and supporting Iraq in its invasion of Iran.
- The U.S. targeting during the 1991 Gulf War bombing campaign went well beyond what was necessary to force Iraqi occupation forces from Kuwait. It included the destruction of key sectors of Iraq’s civilian infrastructure, such as irrigation systems, bridges, and water purification plants. There were also thousands of accidental noncombatant deaths from bombs and missiles that landed in civilian areas.
- The U.S.-led economic sanctions that followed the war made it difficult for Iraqis to obtain spare parts to repair the damage to their civilian infrastructure and to provide medicines and other necessities for the general population. Although Saddam Hussein certainly shares the blame for the humanitarian disaster that resulted—estimates of deaths from malnutrition and preventable diseases

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run well into the hundreds of thousands—most Iraqis believe that U.S. policy actually strengthened Saddam’s grip on power and caused unnecessary suffering among ordinary Iraqis.

- The recent U.S. invasion resulted in additional thousands of civilian casualties, both from the initial air assaults as well as from actions by American occupation forces, who have shot into vehicles of unarmed civilians approaching roadblocks and have fired into crowds of demonstrators.
- U.S. occupation forces failed to live up to their obligations under the Fourth Geneva Conventions to maintain order, to provide adequate health care and other basic services, and to protect antiquities in the face of chaos and looting. Nothing could be more emblematic of U.S. priorities, in the eyes of many Iraqis, than the way U.S. forces immediately secured oil fields and the Iraqi Oil Ministry yet stood by while looters snatched priceless artifacts from museums and cleaned out hospitals of crucial medicines and equipment.
- Washington has thus far refused to allow the United Nations to play a significant role in the political restructuring of Iraq, insisting that it be primarily a U.S. role to chart the country’s future. This raises concerns among many Iraqis, rightly or wrongly, that the U.S. will reorganize their country pursuant to America’s economic, strategic, and ideological interests without adequate input by the Iraqi people themselves.

- The historical failure of the U.S. to support democracy in the Arab world raises serious questions as to whether Washington is really interested in democracy in Iraq. The U.S. still maintains close military, diplomatic, and economic ties with repressive governments in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Oman, and other Arab countries, and Washington is a major supporter of Israeli occupation forces in the Arab-populated West Bank and Gaza Strip.

- The tendency for American policymakers to view freedom as encompassing not just political liberties but also commercial “economic freedom” limits the ability of other nations to protect their domestic industries and natural resources from control by powerful foreign corporations. Already, American companies are being brought in for what the Bush administration refers to as “reconstruction,” and they appear to be settling in to play a major ongoing role in the Iraqi economy for many years to come.

As a result of all these and other factors, there is clearly a growing degree of resentment toward the American military presence in Iraq. A significant number of Iraqis are still sympathetic with the principles of the long-ruling Baath Party, which is rooted in Arab nationalism, anti-imperialism, and socialism. Although Saddam Hussein was to Baathism what Josef Stalin was to Marxism—both came to power through advocacy of a populist and egalitarian ideology that

was subverted by a brutal totalitarian governing apparatus and a cult of personality—the original ideals of the movement still have widespread appeal.

Filling a Power Vacuum

Perhaps more significantly, the power vacuum left by the collapse of Saddam’s dictatorship has cleared the way for social and political organizations led by Shiite clerics, who—unbound by

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the more egalitarian structure in Sunni Islam—can take advantage of their hierarchical organizational structure to mobilize quasi-governmental institutions. Centered in the mosques, which even Saddam Hussein’s dreaded secret police could not totally disrupt, these Shiite clerics—unlike most secular opposition leaders—were able to survive the repression. In many respects, the situation in Iraq today parallels that of Shiite-populated

Iran following the collapse of the autocratic regime of the shah in 1978-79, when Shiite *komitehs* were able to effectively build the infrastructure of a new government based along theocratic lines, even though the revolution itself was broadly based. Within slightly more than two years, hard-line Shiite leaders solidified their control over Iranian government and society, resulting in an extraordinary wave of repression that has been weakened only gradually in recent years.

Although leadership by Shiite clergy and their supporters does not necessarily mean that Iraq

will follow the radical and repressive model of Iran, Shiite Muslims do constitute the majority of the country's population and firmly believe that their time has come to rule Iraq after centuries of Sunni domination. Ironically, there are indications that the U.S. is rehabilitating much of the Baath Party, including Saddam Hussein's police, as a counterweight to the growing Shiite clerical influence. Even though top leaders of the old regime are still wanted men, U.S. forces are beginning to see the remaining Baath Party apparatus as the only entity in the country with the organization and experience to pose a challenge to the emerging Shiite leadership.

Much of the Baath Party consists of individuals who joined solely for career advancement, to take advantage of various perks, or to try to save themselves and their family from persecution. But most members still believe in the party's nationalistic and anti-imperialist principles and will join with the Islamists in challenging American rule. Indeed, as the British learned early last century during their occupation of Iraq after displacing the Ottoman Turks, Iraqis harbor a deep resentment of occupying powers from the West.

A Safer World

There is a very real possibility, then, that a low-level armed insurgency could develop in the coming weeks and months, not from loyalists of Saddam Hussein's regime but from ordinary Iraqis demanding self-determination and an end

to the U.S. occupation. For this reason, there may be no one happier that U.S. forces have invaded and occupied Iraq than Osama bin Laden, who now has Americans where he wants them: in the heart of the Arab-Islamic world and resented by hundreds of millions of people who see this invasion as an act of imperialism. Indeed, if there was any logic behind the madness of September 11, 2001, it may have been the hope that the U.S. would be provoked to

launch such an invasion and that it would spark a dramatic growth in anti-American sentiment throughout the region.

If this was indeed the plan, it appears to be working. The U.S. has squandered the unprecedented sympathy of the international community in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 and faces the prospect of unprecedented hostility today. This shift alone should challenge the

assumption that the invasion of Iraq has somehow made the U.S. safer.

Meanwhile, North Korea—once it found itself on the Bush administration's "axis of evil" list along with Iraq, which it saw was about to be overrun—has decided to break its commitment to halt its nuclear program, apparently in hopes of developing a credible nuclear deterrent to stave off a possible American invasion. Other countries may learn the same "lesson." As a result, the U.S. invasion of Iraq has probably increased rather than decreased the threat of nuclear proliferation.

Still, in proving that the U.S. can decisively defeat any Middle Eastern government that challenges American prerogatives, policymakers hope that—as a result of the Pentagon's overwhelming and devastating display of force—those who oppose U.S. hegemony will somehow now meekly accept American dictates.

Bush administration claims that the U.S. invasion of Iraq would somehow advance the possibility of Arab-Israeli peace appear to be without any foundation. Iraq has in recent years had virtually no role in relation to the decades-old conflict in the lands hundreds of miles to the west. Yasir Arafat and the Fatah leadership have long resented Saddam Hussein's support during the 1980s and early 1990s of the Abu Nidal faction, which was responsible for the murder of a number of prominent Fatah leaders.

Regarding the widely publicized allegation that the Iraqi government was paying money to the families of Palestinian terrorists who are killed, the amount of money Saddam Hussein offered these Palestinian families was far less than what they normally lose in the destruction of their houses by Israeli occupation forces, as is the normal fate of families of terrorists. Nor is Iraq the largest donor to these families; U.S. allies like Saudi Arabia contribute even more money. Finally, the bulk of the Iraqi money goes to families of Palestinian civilians and militiamen killed by Israeli occupation forces during clashes in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, not the families of terrorists. These financial donations were largely part of an effort to gain Iraqi sympathizers among this highly politicized population and encourage support for the tiny pro-Iraqi Palestinian faction known as the Arab Liberation Front. It probably had no impact on the number of suicide bombings and other acts of terrorism against Israelis. Like other opportunistic Arab dictators, Saddam Hussein has long given lip

service to the Palestinian cause but has actually done little in practice.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq has merely highlighted Washington's hypocrisy in demanding that Iraq disarm its weapons of mass destruction and abide by UN Security Council resolutions while refusing to insist that Israel do the same.

Still, in proving that the U.S. can decisively defeat any Middle Eastern government that challenges American prerogatives, policymakers hope that—as a result of the Pentagon's overwhelming and devastating display of force—those who oppose U.S. hegemony will somehow now meekly accept American dictates. However, the

more likely result will be an increased sense that the nation-state is incapable of resisting American hegemony, and it is therefore up to nonstate actors utilizing various forms of asymmetrical warfare—such as terrorism—to fight back. And, as has already become apparent in the ongoing and protracted war against al Qaeda, defeating a decentralized network of underground terrorist cells

is a lot more difficult than defeating the Republican Guard.

An Alternative Security Agenda

In summary, even putting aside the serious moral and legal issues raised by the U.S. invasion of Iraq, America is probably less secure as a result. What, then, can the Bush administration do now to advance America's security interests?

The U.S. needs to vigorously support a sustainable peace between Israelis and Palestinians, recognizing that security for Israel and rights for Palestinians are not mutually exclusive but are in fact mutually dependent.

The U.S. should turn interim governance of the country over to a United Nations administration that will pave the way for Iraqi self-rule.

The U.S. should support the establishment of a weapons of mass destruction-free zone throughout the Middle East.

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- The U.S. should turn interim governance of the country over to a United Nations administration that will pave the way for Iraqi self-rule. There is precedence for just such a UN role in the two-year transition of East Timor from its devastating 24-year occupation by Indonesia to independence this past fall. With the entire international community, including other Arab states, represented in the world body, UN efforts to build up a functioning civil society and representative political system would be more likely to succeed. The eventual Iraqi government would have far greater legitimacy in the eyes of both Iraqis and the international community if it developed under UN administration; otherwise, it would appear—rightly or wrongly—to be simply a puppet regime of the United States.
- The U.S. should support the establishment of a weapons of mass destruction-free zone throughout the Middle East. Such regionwide disarmament regimes have already been established in Latin America and the South Pacific. A WMD-free zone throughout the Middle East has been endorsed both by U.S. allies Egypt and Jordan and by the potentially hostile regimes of Iran and Syria.
- U.S. security operations in the Middle East should be restricted to the real threat: the al Qaeda network. This would primarily require improving intelligence and interdiction, with the use of force restricted to small targeted

paramilitary operations where appropriate. Since such efforts would be greatly enhanced through the cooperation of Middle Eastern states, pursuing policies that are less inclined to alienate the governments and peoples of the region would seem logical.

- The U.S. needs to vigorously support a sustainable peace between Israelis and Palestinians, recognizing that security for Israel and rights for Palestinians are not mutually exclusive but are in fact mutually dependent. Although Washington should continue to insist that Palestinian violence—particularly acts directed toward Israeli civilians—cease unconditionally, the Bush administration must also insist that Israel live up to its international obligations by withdrawing from its illegal settlements in the occupied territories, giving up control of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in order to establish a viable Palestinian state, sharing Jerusalem as the co-capital of both countries, and negotiating a fair resolution to the plight of Palestinian refugees.
- The U.S. must support the establishment of democratic governments throughout the Middle East, which will require—among other things—suspending military and economic aid to all countries that engage in gross and systematic violations of internationally recognized human rights. Although Washington should not try to impose its form of democracy on other countries, a natural evolution toward greater political pluralism in the region will far more likely emerge if the U.S. ends its current support for autocratic governments and occupation armies. As President John F. Kennedy warned, “Those who make peaceful evolution impossible make violent revolution inevitable.”

To set right U.S. policy toward Iraq would not only put the United States more into line with international law and international public opinion, it would be in the national security interests of the country. There is also a more fundamental question as to who we are as a nation. Today’s debate regarding the U.S. role in the world in many ways parallels one that took place just over a century ago when the U.S. invaded the Philippines. Leading intellectuals of the day, such as the writer Mark Twain, formed the Anti-Imperialist League, whose central question was, “What kind of a nation should we be: a republic or an empire?”

The bottom line is this: The U.S. must pursue a foreign policy based more upon human rights, international law, and sustainable development and less on military conquest and occupation, arms transfers, and the profiteering of U.S.-based corporations. Developing such a new posture in the Middle East would not only be more consistent with America’s stated values, it would also make us a lot safer.

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