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Losing the war on terror

The Politics of the "Surge"

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The last three months have been a military and political disaster for the â€˜war on terrorism' in Iraq, and thus for George Bush and to a lesser extent Tony Blair. However, that is not exactly the way they see it. On January 11 George Bush announced a â€˜change in direction' in Iraq policy - the so-called â€˜surge' - which involves sending an extra 21,000 troops, mainly to Baghdad. In his televised speech to the American people, he once again declared that accepting defeat in Iraq was not an option. Earlier in the week he had also turned up the â€˜war on terror' by sending American planes to repeatedly bomb villages in southern Somalia.

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/sadrmural.jpg]
At the edge of Sadr City

On January 12 Tony Blair made a speech on board a British navy ship in which he justified the four wars to which he has sent British troops, and called for the public to accept that Britain was a â€˜war fighting' nation not just a â€˜peace keeping' nation. He also declared that Britain's commitment to such wars would last "for a generation". The disconnection between the growing unpopularity of the war and its main protagonists commitment to it is striking.

So what is really going on? Is Iraq really a massive defeat for the United States and Britain? And why are Bush and Blair seemingly impervious to the massive unpopularity of the war? Let's first look at the events which would suggest that the war is turning into a political and military disaster. These include:

– The scale of Iraqi civilian deaths is becoming undeniable, with the journal of the British doctor's association, the Lancet, claiming 600,000 have died.

– US troop deaths have crossed the symbolic 3000 threshold, although this is an historically low figure given the length of the conflict.

– November's mid-term elections enabled the Democratic Party to win majorities in both houses of the American Congress, a defeat that led directly to the humiliating sacking of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, until then a key member of the administration.

– The Iraq Study group report (the 'Baker Report') commissioned by Bush himself was open that Iraq was a disaster and proposed major changes in US policy.

– The dreadful events at the hanging of Saddam Hussein, turned by the Iraqi government into a sectarian lynching, led to widespread criticism and reinforced the widespread concern that the Iraqi security forces are infiltrated by, and in the case of Interior Ministry troops, actually controlled by Shi'ite militias.

There is no doubt that these events have led to the war becoming hugely unpopular in the United States, with a clear majority critical of Bush. In Britain this is not so much of a concern for Blair, because the war always was hugely unpopular, and - partly as a result - Tony Blair will leave office in the next three or four months anyway. But is the war really a disaster? Has America lost? Is it a real military defeat and political disaster?

This can only be measured against American war aims, and cannot be assessed on the basis of temporary popularity or otherwise. In an important recent article John Bellamy Foster [1] sums up US war aims as follows: "(1) control of

Iraqi oil reserves (the second largest in the world), (2) "geopolitical gains" (or greater domination of the vital Middle East oil region), and (3) strengthening of U.S. global hegemony as a result of this new oil imperium." Achieving these aims does rely on eventually stabilising Iraq, but the present mayhem in the country, amounting to a â€˜low intensity' confessional civil war between Shi'ite and Sunnis, does not mean that this project is definitively defeated. Since 2004 the US has been building 14 huge military bases and the world's largest embassy from which it hopes to control Iraq and dominate the Persian Gulf, but not do day-to-day fighting, which it hopes can be transferred to Iraqi government troops.

Military-political domination of the region is a general objective, but control of the oil (and the oil routes supplying Europe and Japan) are crucial. And exploiting the economic potential of the Iraq oil fields is an immediate priority. The Iraq Study Group Report's Recommendation 63 states: (1) "The United States should encourage investment in Iraq's oil sector by the international community and by international energy companies," and (2) "The United States should assist Iraqi leaders to reorganize the national oil industry as a commercial enterprise, in order to enhance efficiency, transparency, and accountability." In other words, the Iraqi oil industry is to be privatised rapidly and its resources controlled by international, mainly US, oil companies.

Contrary to what much of the media reported in early December, the Baker report did not call for ending the Iraq conflict as soon as possible, It called for American day-today involvement in the war to be scaled down, and it sought a way out of the stalemate while keeping the â€˜spoils of war' - political-military control of the region and above all control of the oil.

In fact, the original call for the â€˜surge' in US troop numbers in the short term, in a fruitless and badly conceived effort to crush the sectarian militias, came from the Baker report itself.

However the main question remain to try to establish a modicum of security without which exploitation of the oil fields will be impossible. That in turn depends on finding a political settlement which key representatives from the three main confessional (or in the case of the Kurds, national) groups can be drawn. It is here that the US is up against the results of decisions it has already taken, particularly its decision to do everything possible to unleash sectarian conflict.

Rumours indicated that the US sponsored conference of community leaders held in Amman at the end of last year had openly discussed the break-up of the country into three - a Shia southern state which would in effect become a protectorate of Iran, a northern Kurdish state and a Sunni state based in the west and centre of the country.

Such a scenario is fraught with dangers for the United States. In the first place, there are giant oil field in all three regions, but aside from the giant Kirkuk field in the Kurdish area, the biggest are around Basra, Rumaylah, Majnun and Halfaya in the Shi'ite south. Controlling the oil in a pro-Iranian Shia statelet would be very difficult and prone to being immediately turned off at a moment's notice by Tehran. In addition a hugely strengthened Iran is a political-military disaster for the United States and Israel and would give a huge boost to pro-Iranian groups like Hizbollah in Lebanon.

In turn Turkey would furiously oppose giving statehood the Kurdish region adjoining its own Kurdish areas in the south east of the country. None of the states in the region want an independent Kurdistan which could act as a beacon for Kurdish minority in their own country.

The responsibility for the ethnic conflict in the country lies squarely with the United States itself. Already in 2004 the Pentagon was talking about another â€˜Phoenix operation', a replica of the Vietnam campaign of assassination against alleged or suspected supporters of the Communist insurgency. The US gave the go-ahead to the Sadr

Brigades, linked to the Interior Ministry and controlled by leading Shi'ite clerics, to start a campaign of assassination against Sunni insurgents and their sympathisers. This campaign had the full backing of Iran. It was this, with its grisly daily toll of murdered Sunnis found with their hands tied and shot in the back of the head, that unleashed the Sunni car bomber against Sadr City and other centres of the Shia population.

The United States unleashed this carnage consciously to disrupt the possibility of a growing unity between Sunnis and Shi'ites against the US invasion. During the first bloody battle of Fallujah in the Spring of 2004 there had been an enormous outpouring of sympathy for the insurgents, and Shi'ite men in the south and Baghdad queued at mosques to give blood and material aid for the Sunni. Walden Bello at the time wrote "Fallujah is the beginning of an new Iraq" and foresaw a growing nationalist revolt in which Sunnis and Shias would fight together. Through the Shi'ite militias, the United States and Iran collaborated is disrupting this project, aided it has to be said by the more sectarian forces among the Sunni insurgents.

Now the US has decided that the power of the Shi'ite militias is an obstacle to creating a unified, pro-US, government. The Sorcerer's Apprentice is preparing to fight the monster he created. It appears that a key objective is to defeat the Mahdi army, controlled by Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, in its Sadr City stronghold in Baghdad. According to Guardian commentator Jonathan Steele , "This could produce a civilian bloodbath of colossal proportions, dwarfing the massacres in Fallujah in 2004" [2] . Reports indicate the US in considering turning Baghdad into a series of gated ghettos, with US troops guarding access. American troops will then â€˜work through' each district to â€˜clear' them of insurgents. This overall plan is a blueprint for hand-to hand gunfights through the capital, with hundreds of deaths of both combatants and civilians.

The fact that this is even a possibility is down to the Democratic Party in the United States. Although constitutionally the US president is â€˜Commander in Chief' of the armed forces and can do want he wants with them, in practice the Congress could cut off funding, making continued occupation impossible. There is absolutely zero possibility of the Democrats doing that. After all, most of them voted for the war. While they were very happy to ride the wave of disenchantment with the war to score gains in House and Senate elections last November, in fact they only called for a â€˜change in direction' of the war, largely undefined, and not its ending. Neither do the vast majority of Democrats in the Congress oppose the â€˜war on terror' or the profligate use of US militarism to ensure the position of US capitalism. The ceremony of assumption of the position of Speaker of the House by Democrat Nancy Pelosi was a stomach-churning event, in which Democrats and Republicans went to extravagant lengths to promise one another the maximum of bi-partisan political co-operation.

Whatever the immediate outcome of the â€˜surge' in US forces in Iraq, in the longer term there is no likelihood of a complete US pull-out from Iraq or the Gulf region in general. Writing of the Baker report, John Bellamy Foster comments:

"Indeed, the bipartisan "realists" envision something more like a partial withdrawal and redeployment of U.S. forces than a complete withdrawal from Iraq. Here it is important to recognize that despite the report's insistence that "all combat brigades not necessary for force protection could be out of Iraq" by early 2008, this is understood as still leaving a large role for U.S. troops: in the areas of "force protection," as "units embedded with Iraqi forces, in rapid-reaction and special operations teams, and in training, equipping, advising . . . and search and rescue" . . . as well as intelligence and other support operations â€" all of which are included in the Iraq Study Group Report recommendations. Indeed, the plan offered by the Iraq Study Group would involve multiplying by as much as five times the number of U.S. troops embedded in Iraqi forces for an indefinite period.

Further, we are told that "a vital mission of the U.S. military would be to maintain (indefinitely) rapid-reaction teams and special operations teams. These teams would be available to undertake strike missions against al Qaeda in Iraq when the opportunity arises, as well as for other missions considered vital by the U.S. commander in Iraq." The U.S.

would also continue to train the Iraq police forces, while moving the "police commandos" of the national police (paramilitary death squads originally promoted by the United States) into the Iraqi Army, where the United States would have greater control over their counterinsurgency operations.

In case there should be a misunderstanding about the continuing U.S. military role in Iraq, the report explicitly states: "Even after the United States has moved all combat brigades out of Iraq we would maintain a considerable military presence in the region, with our still significant force in Iraq and with our powerful air, ground, and naval deployments in Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar, as well as an increased presence in Afghanistan" (italics added). These forces would be available to support the Iraqi government, block the disintegration of the country, fight terrorism, train equip and support the Iraqi troops, and deter foreign aggression. In short, they would be available for all conceivable military missions necessary to control Iraq and to limit its "sovereignty" to that of a subservient neo-colony."

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Blairafghan.jpg]
War fighter not peace keeper. Blair in Afghanistan

What is being tested out in Iraq of course has a decisive military aspect, but above all the Iraq adventure highlights the new political demands of the United States on the other capitalist states. The US demands the right to decide the military, political and economic order in strategically key areas of the world, untrammeled by either the United Nations and international law. Alongside these unilateral rights, the US state demands that other states adhere to the diktats of multilateral bodies that it controls - the World Trade Organistion, the IMF and the World Bank. To pull this project off - not exactly world government, but at least world domination and invigilation - demands a minimum threshold of credibility; without it other leading states will feel less pressure to get in line with US demands. Today that means above all the credibility of the â€˜war on terror', and that in turn is being sorely tried in Iraq. As numerous commentators have said, a defeat in Iraq will have much more serious consequences than the defeat in Vietnam.

While most of the attention is on Iraq, the spectacularly under-reported colonial war in Afghanistan is also going badly. British troops who are doing much of the fighting against the Taliban in Helmand province are making little headway. According to official figures the NATO troops killed more than 4000 people last year, including more than 1000 civilians - not surprising when military attacks are launched on rural villages and towns suspected of being centres of Taliban support. British Brigadier Richard Nugee, spokesperson for NATO forces, said January 2 that NATO was killing â€˜too many' civilians, which raises of the question of how many would be the right number. Helpfully for a leader of a party profiting from anti-war feeling, Hillary Rodham Clinton suggested January 12 that there be a â€˜surge' in the number of troops in Afghanistan (although she opposes it in Iraq).

Although the United States has largely sub-contracted Afghanistan to Britain, failure there will be another chapter in the failure of its â€˜war on terror'.

Go to information about [Jan 27 Washington demonstration](#)

Go to information about [February 24 London demonstration](#)

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[1] At [MRzine](#).

[2] The Guardian, 12 January