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Iraq

# Whither Iraq?

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**Anyone who happened to watch the message on Iraq in George W. Bush's State of the Union address to the US Congress on February 3 must be convinced that the members of both Houses, starting with Dick Cheney himself, are definitely making the physical effort needed to sustain their cardiac health.**

The frenzied rhythm of their standing ovations equaled indeed the most intensive aerobics. As for seeking an Oscar award, it was a total failure, the scriptwriters of the Bush administration being better at soap operas than at good quality movies, and Bush himself being a pitiful actor, even by Ronald Reagan's easy-to-match standard.

The hypocrisy was at its highest: as was predictable and predicted, George W. Bush tried to present the Iraqi elections as a great feat of democracy for which his administration could claim the main credit. On TV screens, the public could see an Iraqi woman standing up in front of the two chambers of Congress and raising her purple finger – the forefinger in her case, whereas the Iraqi people had indeed raised their middle fingers at their occupiers, to borrow Naomi Klein's joke in her excellent piece ("Getting the Purple Finger," *The Nation*, Feb. 10, 2005).

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/sistaniposter.jpg>]

In the next few days, the US mainstream media themselves could not hide the fact that the US had actually suffered a real defeat with the election. Not only had this election been imposed on the occupiers by the mass street pressure of the Iraqi population, after several months of heated confrontation between US Proconsul Paul Bremer and Shia Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani; but the latter managed to frustrate all attempts by Washington's new Proconsul John Negroponte to form a single slate of all the participants in the post-invasion US-appointed Iraqi "Governing Councils."

Washington's and London's stooges were rejected, and Iyad Allawi, as well as al-Yawar, Pachachi, etc., had no choice but to wage campaigns on their own, while the Ayatollah sponsored a United Iraqi Alliance (UIA, its commonly used denomination in English) friendly to Iran, including the key Shia Islamic fundamentalist forces as well as a variety of other Shia and non-Shia groups.

Despite the heavy-handed US interference in the electoral campaign, and the strong financial and political backing by Washington and London, their stooge Allawi was severely defeated, getting less than 14% of the votes – and this despite the non-participation in the voting of an important part of the Iraqi population, most of them very much opposed to everything he represents.

The remarkable and impressive mass mobilization among Shias and Kurds in the safest provinces of the country (on this, see the appendix below) led to a sweeping victory of the UIA with 48% of the total vote cast followed by the Kurdish Alliance with 26%, Allawi's list coming a distant third with only little over half the votes of the Kurdish slate. (A fast spreading rumor says that the US got the proportion of votes won by the UIA depressed from 60% to less than 50% in order to prevent them from deciding the fate of the country.)

Washington's vain hope that Allawi's slate, along with other pro-occupation forces, could get a number of seats allowing them to perpetuate the puppet regime with the support of Kurdish members of the elected Assembly was shattered. Even though the UIA does not command the two-thirds of seats required for key decisions – this according to the Bremer-devised Transitional Administrative Law, which is contested by the UIA and which Ayatollah al-Sistani vetoed when Washington tried to inscribe it in the UN resolution calling for the election – it is by far the main pillar of the new Assembly, with more than half its seats.

Washington stands now hoping that it will be able to break the Shia coalition, through its stooge Allawi, by resorting to all kind of dirty means from threats to bribery. The trial of strength between al-Sistani and the occupiers is far from finished. Whatever the developments in the near future in this Iraqi drama, full of coups de théâtre and backstage maneuvering, two issues should be already very clear.

### **WASHINGTON'S ATTITUDE ON THE WITHDRAWAL OF ITS FORCES**

It was absolutely obvious to all observers that the great majority of Arab voters – and therefore the overwhelming majority of the Iraqi population, taking into account the dominant mood of those who didn't vote – were and are opposed to the occupation. Actually, it did not escape most observers' attention that the vast majority of Arab voters considered their vote to be a political means to get rid of the occupation. This mood was so compelling that almost all Arab Iraqi slates included the withdrawal of foreign troops as a central item of their program. Even Allawi's list did so! (Their banners stated in Arabic: Vote for Allawi's slate if you want a strong Iraq free of foreign troops.)

The UIA's electoral program called very explicitly for negotiations with the occupation forces in order to set a timetable for their withdrawal. This very same demand has become the central requisite of the political forces that are staunchest in their opposition to the occupation: the Sunni Association of Muslim Scholars (or Council of Muslim Ulema) and Moqtada al-Sadr's Current. The two entered an informal alliance to press this demand on the majority of the elected Assembly.

It is to this same demand again that George W. Bush referred explicitly when he declared in his State of the Union address:

"We will not set an artificial timetable for leaving Iraq, because that would embolden the terrorists and make them believe they can wait us out. We are in Iraq to achieve a result: A country that is democratic, representative of all its people, at peace with its neighbors and able to defend itself. And when that result is achieved, our men and women serving in Iraq will return home with the honor they have earned."

The choice of words was quite precise and meaningful: "We will not set an artificial timetable" meant no timetable at all, since any timetable can only be "artificial," whereas the "natural" deadline that Bush hinted at – "We are in Iraq to achieve a result... And when that result is achieved..." – amounts to saying that Washington will decide unilaterally if and when it will withdraw its troops. The "result" to be achieved hints at the fact that the new Assembly and future government of Iraq are not yet "representative of all its people."

A "democratic" Iraq means, for Bush, a country that is not ruled by an Iran-like regime combining Islamic fundamentalism, a measure of parliamentarianism and hostility to US domination (though Washington is perfectly happy with the Saudi combination of servility to the US and extreme fundamentalism – certainly the most undemocratic and anti-women regime on earth). An Iraq "at peace with its neighbors" could only mean, in Bush's mouth, an Iraqi government at peace with Israel, along with the Jordanian and Saudi kingdoms, with the Iranian and Syrian neighbors "pacified" according to Washington's standard. Finally, an Iraq "able to defend itself" means that Washington will not withdraw (partially) from the country before it is assured that it is under the control of armed forces that are as much dependent on Washington as their Saudi and Jordanian counterparts are.

This section of Bush's State of the Union address, with its stress on the "result" versus the "timetable," was echoing very clearly the warning formulated publicly a few days earlier by two senior veterans of the Republican foreign policy establishment, Henry Kissinger and George Shultz. They had published together an article in the Washington Post on January 25, on the eve of the Iraqi election – the title of which was: "Results, Not Timetables, Matter in Iraq!"

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It is worth quoting at length due to its blunt expression of the real strategic considerations guiding Washington:

"The essential prerequisite for an acceptable exit strategy is a sustainable outcome, not an arbitrary time limit. For the outcome in Iraq will shape the next decade of American foreign policy. A debacle would usher in a series of convulsions in the region as radicals and fundamentalists moved for dominance, with the wind seemingly at their backs. Wherever there are significant Muslim populations, radical elements would be emboldened. As the rest of the world related to this reality, its sense of direction would be impaired by the demonstration of American confusion in Iraq.

"If a democratic process is to unify Iraq peacefully, a great deal depends on how the Shiite majority defines majority rule. So far the subtle Shiite leaders, hardened by having survived decades of Saddam Hussein's tyranny, have been ambiguous about their goals. They have insisted on early elections — indeed, the date of Jan. 30 was established on the basis of a near-ultimatum by the most eminent Shiite leader, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani. The Shiites have also urged voting procedures based on national candidate lists, which work against federal and regional political institutions. Recent Shiite pronouncements have affirmed the goal of a secular state but have left open the interpretation of majority rule. An absolutist application of majority rule would make it difficult to achieve political legitimacy. ...

"The reaction to intransigent Sunni brutality and the relative Shiite quiet must not tempt us into identifying Iraqi legitimacy with unchecked Shiite rule. The American experience with Shiite theocracy in Iran since 1979 does not inspire confidence in our ability to forecast Shiite evolution or the prospects of a Shiite-dominated bloc extending to the Mediterranean. ...

"The Constituent Assembly emerging from the elections will be sovereign to some extent. But the United States' continuing leverage should be focused on four key objectives: (1) to prevent any group from using the political process to establish the kind of dominance previously enjoyed by the Sunnis; (2) to prevent any areas from slipping into Taliban conditions as havens and recruitment centers for terrorists; (3) to keep Shiite government from turning into a theocracy, Iranian or indigenous; (4) to leave scope for regional autonomy within the Iraqi democratic process."

What Kissinger, Shultz and company are clearly advocating, and what the Bush administration is acting on, is that Washington must prevent the "Shia" majority — meaning any Iraqi majority hostile to Washington — from ruling Iraq. It must remain in control of the land, by playing on the rivalries between Shia and Sunnis as well as between Arabs and Kurds, according to the famous imperial motto of "divide and rule."

The stakes here are all the more crucial for US imperialist interests, in that:

1) A full political defeat in Iraq — i.e. losing control over the country and being compelled to leave it — will have worse consequences than Vietnam with regard to US imperial credibility, its ability to intervene militarily, as well as US economic and political world hegemony. Due to the oil factor, the strategic importance of Iraq and the Arab-Persian Gulf area is far higher than whatever was at stake in Vietnam and the whole of Indochina.

2) Iraq is part of a regional, mainly Shia, "crescent of crisis" in Washington's — and Israel's — strategic view, which stretches from Lebanon, where it is represented by the Hizbullah in alliance with Syrian hegemony, to the Alawite-dominated regime in Syria (the Alawites are an offspring of Shiism), to pro-Iranian Shia forces in Iraq, to the mullahs' regime in Tehran.

Washington has set itself as a priority the subversion of this reshaped and refocused version of the "axis of evil." Its attitude to the events in Lebanon, as well as its increasing threats against Damascus and Tehran, indicate the

context in which it envisages its role in Iraq. In light of all that, there should be no illusion whatsoever about the present US administration's willingness to get out of Iraq. British military sources' affirmation in late January that Washington and London were devising "an exit strategy, but without a public timetable" are pure disinformation meant at appeasing a public opinion increasingly opposed to prolonging the occupation.

# THE NEXT IRAQI GOVERNMENT AND THE OCCUPATION

The discussion in Iraq among political forces of the popular majority is between those calling for a withdrawal of foreign troops in the medium-term and those calling for their withdrawal in the short-term. It is clear that the dominant fractions in the UIA, probably backed on this issue too by Ayatollah al-Sistani, belong to the first camp. They believe "no doubt, genuinely for most of them" that they could take advantage of the continued presence of occupation forces in order to build-up armed forces under their own control and thus create conditions for a smooth withdrawal of foreign troops. This view has been expressed by the UIA's candidate for the key post of prime minister, Ibrahim al-Jaafari.

It is a deadly wrong view. On the one hand, experience has shown in an indisputable way that the longer the occupation lingers, the more the situation in Iraq deteriorates. The occupation breeds chaos more effectively than any other factor or force, be it foreign or local. The reason for that is quite simple: the occupation is deeply hated by the great majority of Arab Iraqis, a hatred that is aggravated day after day by the clumsiness and brutality of the occupiers. The withdrawal of the foreign troops, on the contrary, is the prerequisite for security and order to prevail and for the effective building of a new Iraqi state.

On the other hand, the occupiers can be legitimately suspected of fostering forms of chaos and violence, as well as ethnic and sectarian rifts, in order to perpetuate and legitimate the occupation. They are actually accused of behaving in this way by the great majority of the Iraqi people. Most Iraqis believe that Washington is deliberately sowing the seeds of civil strife between them, by playing each community against the others. They are convinced that Washington is purposely letting terrorist groups, like Zarqawi's and other fanatics, organize their barbaric activities in order to discredit the legitimate resistance and to foster forms of chaos that are used as pretexts for the indefinite prolongation of the occupation.

This is one reason, incidentally, why the staunchest anti-occupation political forces, i.e. the already mentioned alliance between the Sunni Association of Muslim Scholars and Moqtada al-Sadr's Current, have repeatedly called for a clear distinction to be drawn between the legitimate resistance against occupation forces and what they call "terrorism," putting rightly under this label those who resort to violence against innocent civilians, whether Iraqis or foreigners, and of course to sectarian attacks.

Washington's Machiavellian practices have reached a new degree with the contacts it has recently undertaken with the Baathist wing of the resistance, i.e. the network left over by the Baathist dictatorship with huge amounts of money and vast quantities of weapons. This section of the resistance to the US occupation "most loathed by the overwhelming majority of the Iraqi people because it strives not to liberate the country, but to re-establish its unbearable tyrannical oppression" is now negotiating some kind of deal with Washington.

This development is perfectly in line with the shift in Washington's plans in Iraq that was illustrated by the replacement of Chalabi with Allawi. The former set himself up as the champion of "de-Baathification" and played a key role in Bremer's decision to dissolve the apparatuses of the Baathist dictatorship "thus opening the way to one of two outcomes: chaos and prolonged US occupation, or the building of a new state based on majority rule. The

latter advocated, before the invasion and after, a collaboration between Washington and major sections of the Baathist apparatuses (on this, see my article "Bush's Cakewalk into the Iraqi Quagmire" posted on May 5, 2004 on CounterPunch).

When Bremer got rid of Chalabi and designated Allawi as head of the puppet regime, the latter started reintegrating former major Baathists in the new Iraqi government and armed forces, thus infuriating the key Shia forces coalesced in the UIA. The Shia fundamentalist forces possessing militias, i.e. the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, the Al-Daawa Party and al-Sadr's Current, want to purge the new Iraqi armed forces of reintegrated high-ranking Baathists and merge their own militias into them — a nightmarish scenario for Washington. It is clear that Washington will try to veto any control of these parties on the "power ministries" and the armed forces and repressive apparatuses.

Faced with the prospect of a clash with the Shia majority, Washington is determined to use any means necessary to counter that threat, including an "anti-Iranian" alliance with the Baathists. After all, had not Washington already entered for many years an alliance with Saddam Hussein himself against the Iranian regime?

All these developments stress one more time the necessity for the anti-imperialist left abroad to be very discerning in its attitude to the very complex Iraqi situation, and to avoid pitfalls such as an unqualified support to the Iraqi resistance without the necessary distinctions, and the simplistic belief that the only legitimate or effective form of struggle is the armed one.

The Shia-Sunni anti-occupation alliance of the Association of Muslim Scholars and al-Sadr's Current is perfectly right in its insistence on the withdrawal of foreign troops as the central demand and necessity in the present situation in Iraq. They are the political mediation between the pressure of the legitimate armed resistance to the occupation and the anti-occupation political pressure expressed by the population and the representatives of its majority. The combination of these two pressures is crucial for the liberation of Iraq.

This anti-occupation alliance is right on the national issue. It doesn't mean however that they are "progressive" forces. Moqtada al-Sadr's Current in particular is a fiercely fundamentalist tendency, deeply reactionary on many social, cultural and gender issues. It is only a testimony to the historical failure of the left in that part of the world — the glaring defeat of the Iraqi Communist Party in the elections is a clear illustration — that religious forces, including various brands of fundamentalists, are dominant in the peoples' struggle against foreign and local oppression. Fortunately, the very heterogeneity of Iraqi society imposes clear limits on any project to impose an Islamic fundamentalist rule in the country.

## THE TASK OF THE ANTIWAR MOVEMENT

Notwithstanding the position that the next Iraqi government will express on the issue of the occupation, the antiwar movement abroad must definitely increase, more than ever, its pressure around the demand of the immediate and total withdrawal of occupation troops from Iraq. This is actually not only in the best interest of the Iraqi people, but even in the interest of the majority of the new Assembly itself and its representation in government.

The fact is that this majority will be confronted sooner or later with US pressures of all kind (on this, see the articles by Milan Rai, "How Washington Plans To Dominate The New Iraqi National Assembly," posted on Electronic Iraq, Feb. 16, 2005 and the one by Jaafar al-Ahmar, in Arabic, "Interior and Defense will determine the influence of the UIA and al-Jaafari's success in resisting US pressure," published in Al-Hayat, Feb. 24, 2005). It will have to face squarely the fact that Washington does not want to contemplate any pre-set schedule for the withdrawal, let alone the

prospect of a total withdrawal of its troops from Iraq. The Bush administration is building a military infrastructure for the stationing of US troops in Iraq "in the strategic area of the oil fields mainly" for an indefinite period. That the continued presence of US troops for the last 60 years in both Germany and Japan is often given as a model by pundits of the Bush administration is eloquent in this regard.

Therefore, the Iraqi people, and its majority representatives, stand only to gain from the most powerful pressure exerted by the antiwar movement abroad for the immediate, unconditional and total withdrawal of occupation troops from Iraq. It is for this very reason that it is very important that the forthcoming international day of mobilization against the occupation of Iraq on 19 March be successful.

The antiwar movement should also start planning for the perspective of a protracted struggle to end the occupation of Iraq and to prevent new military adventures against Iran, Syria or whichever country Washington will threaten tomorrow. This entails setting a calendar of mobilizations in order to put the movement in the long haul perspective, instead of setting each time one single appointment and leaving the future of the mobilizations undecided.

The global antiwar movement did it once. It can do it again: We shall overcome.

February 24, 2005

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### **Appendix: On the January 30 election**

Given the nature of the prevailing security conditions in Iraq, and the non-participation of important areas of the country, the turnout of close to 60% of eligible voters was truly extraordinary! Since the food-rationing lists were used as lists of voters, one can assume that the given number of eligible voters was equal to the potential one, if not in excess (much more in any case than the number of registered voters which is used as a criterion in most elections).

Such a participation rate of 60% "in a country where, due to the imposed curfew, voters had often to walk very long distances to get to the polling stations, and where several terrorist groups had threatened to kill would-be voters through snipers, car-bombs or suicide-attacks, and to murder anyone seen with a purple finger" was a remarkable achievement. It was a powerful testimony to the thirst for democracy of a people that has been subjected for several decades to one of the most brutal regimes in the world, and in particular, among the most oppressed sections of this people, which formed between them the overwhelming majority.

Beginning the day after the Iraqi elections, there has been an incredibly wide use of the same single article in the New York Times on the 1967 election in South Vietnam (Peter Grose, "U.S. Encouraged by Vietnam Vote: Officials Cite 83% Turnout Despite Vietcong Terror," September 4, 1967). Countless commentaries have quoted this same article, which started: "United States officials were surprised and heartened today at the size of turnout in South Vietnam's presidential election despite a Vietcong terrorist campaign to disrupt the voting."

This analogy is completely false and misleading. To measure the huge difference between the two situations, searchers of the NYT archive could have read, for instance, the article titled "Senators Deplore 'Fraud' In Vote Drive in Vietnam," by Hedrick Smith in the New York Times dated August 12, 1967 "three weeks before the election and Grose's article.

It began: "A dozen Senators from both [US ruling] parties charged today that the South Vietnamese Presidential election campaign was being turned into a 'fraud,' 'farce' and 'charade' by the ruling military junta."

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And right these Senators were! It is possible to prove indisputably, from now available sources like CIA documents, that the 1967 Vietnamese elections were rigged, imposed by Washington on reluctant US stooges, Thieu and Ky, and designed to give a veneer of legitimacy to their dictatorial puppet regime hated by the great majority of the Vietnamese people.

To draw an analogy with the Iraqi elections imposed on Washington by the Iraqi masses, where the chief US stooge was defeated and which were won by a slate led by the best friends of Washington's worst enemy in the region, defies elementary logic.

Does one also need to mention the huge difference between the Vietnamese resistance and those forces that tried to prevent the elections in Iraq by an unprecedented terrorist campaign directed against the voters themselves?

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