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Iraq occupation in crisis

Quagmire

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With less than one month to go before the projected Iraqi elections, no one knows whether they will take place all at once or over a protracted period or how many people will vote. The BBC World Service reports that in Baghdad, you wouldn't even know that an election is taking place. Every day there are resistance attacks, which the US and its allies are powerless to prevent. The US stabilisation project is in danger of collapse.

The cause of this crisis of the US project in Iraq is obvious - the lack of loyal partners with a sufficient base of support to secure an end to the insurgency. In the face of this the new US ambassador John Negroponte and his Washington masters are attempting to secure a working alliance with the Shi'ite clergy - a dangerous and desperate manoeuvre. Even if this yields temporary results, the election is likely to be seen as illegitimate by millions - especially in the Sunni areas - who will boycott it.

Before we go into detail about the political forces involved, a brief overview of US strategy. The US doesn't want to make Iraq a direct colony, it wants a dependency like the old situation of the Philippines or Panama. In other words a 'legitimate' elected Iraqi government, but with twelve giant US military bases there forever and a substantial number of US government and business personnel who will 'help' run the country. Through this mechanism Iraq will become a pivot of US control of the Middle East and world oil supplies.

In mid-2004 the US decided that it had to strike decisive military blows at the resistance in the 'Sunni triangle', to try to 'kill' the insurgency, in order to stabilise the country for elections at the end of January. This military offensive of course was centred on the attack on Fallujah which started on November 13.

Fallujah because it is seen as the centre of the resistance, but also because of the defeat suffered there by the marines in April 2004. Then, after three weeks of fighting and around 100 marines killed, political pressure worldwide about the hundreds of civilian dead made the US authorities back off. The marines were withdrawn and on May 1 2004 security was entrusted to ex-Ba'athist general Jasim Mohammed Saleh, and a force of 1100 former Iraqi soldiers. Whatever the intention of Jasim, the Iraqi security force either defected to, or fraternised with, the guerrillas, resulting in effective resistance control of the city.

In November the marines went back to revenge their fallen comrades, to finish off the resistance, with no concern whatever for civilians who remained. The results of this offensive can be briefly summarised:

- The leadership and probably a big majority of the resistance fighters left the city before the battle began, leaving an unknown number of fighters to stand and fight - and to die.
- The US forces used artillery, napalm and phosphorus bombs on civilian areas resulting in many hundreds of civilian deaths.
- Hundreds of men trying to leave the city were detained and are still being kept prisoner, with an unknown fate.
- Weeks after the fighting was supposed to have finished there are daily firefights with remaining resistance fighters, many of whom may have re-infiltrated the city. The resistance has been incredibly heroic, with individual or small groups of fighters holding out for days against overwhelming firepower and much larger forces, before eventually falling silent.

– As everyone knows, the city is totally wrecked and more than 200,000 refugees from the fighting have been left destitute in camps some distance away.

– At least 80 marines were killed, with hundreds being wounded or maimed.

Reporting from Fallujah relied on ‘embedded’ reporters who went in with US troops. Even they reported on a few well-publicised cases of American troops killing wounded prisoners, the tip of the iceberg of the barbarism perpetrated in that city.

Whatever else it did, the assault on Fallujah did not kill the resistance. Far from abating the fighting is escalating. Robert Burns from Associated Press reported December 31:

“The U.S. military suffered at least 348 deaths in Iraq over the final four months of the year, more than in any other similar period since the invasion in March 2003.

The number of wounded surpassed 10,000, with more than a quarter injured in the last four months as direct combat, roadside bombs and suicide attacks escalated. When President Bush declared May 1, 2003, that major combat operations were over, the number wounded stood at just 542.

The number of attacks on U.S. and allied troops grew from an estimated 1,400 attacks in September to 1,600 in October and 1,950 in November. A year earlier, the attacks numbered 649 in September, 896 in October and 864 in November.

U.S. commanders insist they are making progress, in part by taking the fight more directly to the insurgents. And they remain hopeful that more U.S.-trained Iraqi security forces will join the fight soon.

Some observers are more doubtful.....

Pentagon statistics show that for all of 2004, at least 838 U.S. troops died in Iraq. Of that total, more than 700 were killed in action, by far the highest number of American battlefield deaths since at least 1980, the first year the Pentagon compiled all-service casualty statistics.

It almost certainly is the highest killed in action total for any year since the Vietnam War.

U.S. deaths averaged 62 per month through the first half of the year. But since June 28, when U.S. officials restored Iraqi sovereignty and dissolved the U.S. civilian occupation authority, that average has jumped to about 78.

Deaths among U.S. National Guard and Reserve troops are rising, reaching a single-month peak of 27 in November. At least 17 were killed in December. Nearly 200 Guard and Reserve troops have died since the war began, and more than one-third of those deaths happened in the past four months.

Bush administration and U.S. military officials had predicted the insurgents would intensify their efforts to create chaos before the Jan. 30 elections for an Iraqi National Assembly. Defence Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld said during a visit last week in Iraq that he saw no reason to think the violence would abate after the elections.

Nearly 100 Marines have been killed over the past two months in Fallujah. Since the Marines regained control of Fallujah after fierce battles in November the focus of insurgent violence has shifted to the northern city of Mosul.

A Dec. 21 attack on a military mess hall in Mosul killed 22, including 13 U.S. soldiers and a sailor – the deadliest single attack on a U.S. installation in the war.

Even as U.S. losses mount, the brunt of insurgent violence is hitting the Iraqi security forces being trained by U.S. troops, as well as Iraqi political figures and Iraqis seen as supporting the Americans.”

Against this background the US has to take major political steps to secure its position. Now that “kill the resistance and then hold elections” has failed, it means going back to simultaneously fighting the resistance and holding elections, to at least secure a minimum of legitimacy within some sections the population, notably the Shi'ite population in the south and the Kurdish population in the north. That means relying on the Shi'ite clergy to mobilise a big turnout, which means banking on the Shi'ite parties to form the core a new government.

At the same time as the national elections the, the Kurdish region in the north will elect its own assembly, which is certain to be dominated by the Kurdish Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan.

The core of the mainly Shi'ite alliance for the elections is the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution (SICRI), led by Grand Ayatollah Ali al Sistani from Najaf, the highest ranking member of the Shi'ite clergy in Iraq and one of the five or six most senior worldwide.

Sistani has been playing a waiting game. During the invasion he instructed the Shiite community not to oppose the invasion. At the same time he has expressed his ‘unease’ at the US presence in the country, and indicated that it cannot be tolerated in the long term. Meanwhile he and his supporters have been doing everything possible to gain control of local government structures in the Shiite south of the country, and in the Shi'ite areas of Baghdad.

Sistani probably colluded with the United States in their attack on Muqtada al Sadr's Shi'ite based ‘Mahdi army’ in April and May of 2004; he conveniently left the country for medical treatment while al Sadr's militia fought it out with US troops. He then returned as the ‘peacemaker’, apparently brokering a ceasefire between the two sides.

Both Sistani and Muqtada al Sadr have strong links with the clerical leaders in Iran, but probably with different factions. In any case for the moment Sistani, through SICRI, is promoting a quietist line, concentrated on being the decisive force in the upcoming elections. The US knows this and is prepared for SICRI to be a prominent, if not the dominant, force in the new government formed post-elections.

Also in the January 30 polls will be the mainly Shi'ite Iraqi Communist Party, as well the coalitions led by present prime minister Ayad Allawi, and Iraqi National Congress led by the former US favourite Ahmed Chalabi. With large amounts of money on offer to those who participate in the electoral process and the subsequent 'government', alliances are temporary and shifting. For example, it is expected that Muqtada al Sadr will participate in the Chalabi-led list.

However the legitimacy of the elections has been dealt a fearful blow by the boycott announced 28 December by the Sunni Iraqi Islamic Party, the most influential Sunni Muslim group, and by the influential Association of Muslim Scholars, another Sunni group (an announcement that led to several prominent members of the Association being assassinated by 'persons unknown').

Everyone knows that elections boycotted by the Sunni population will lack any legitimacy and that consequently the insurgency will continue.

"To have an election without the Sunnis will just further erode whatever tenuous ties there are keeping the country together," said Stephen Buck, a former deputy chief of mission in the U.S. Embassy in Iraq. "We will have failed miserably if we have an election that just polarises Iraq and pushes it toward civil war."

If as seems likely a new government is formed in which SICRI is a major component, there remain two major unresolved questions for such an arrangement. First, what are the long-term objectives of Sistani and SICRI; second can SICRI actually deliver Shi'ite support for a long-term US presence in the country.

According to W. Andrew Terrill in a document produced for the US army's think tank, the Strategic Studies Institute, SICRI was discredited amongst the Shi'ite population because of its support for Iran in the Iran-Iraq war. This makes it difficult to see whether Sistani could hold the line for long against mass demands for a fatwa against the American presence.

In any case, it is obviously a dangerous strategy for Sistani to accommodate himself in the medium- or long-term sense with American control of the country. He is threatened by being eventually outflanked by more radical clerics, even if Muqtada al Sadr is integrated into the Chalabi alliance and is in the post-election government. And he is vulnerable to mass sentiment among the Shi'ite population against the American occupation.

There is another problem for the US. Sistani is at least involved in a constant dialogue with the Iranian leadership. Centring US hopes for a new government on him necessarily means accepting a new government which is susceptible to significant Iranian pressure.

Meanwhile the occupation crisis is taking its toll in Washington. Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has become a lightning rod for frustration about the apparent lack of progress in defeating the insurgency and for continuous revelations about torture of prisoners.

In December he was viciously attacked in the right-wing Weekly Standard by key neoconservative ideologue William Kristol, who called for his resignation. Kristol attacks Rumsfeld from the right, arguing that America is underspending in Iraq, does not have enough forces there, and is not prepared to commit hundreds of thousands of troops indefinitely. Rumsfeld has also been attacked by Norman Schwarzkopf, the key US general in the first Iraq war, and by a raft of Republican senators led by John McCain.

Rumours persist that deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz continues to back Ahmad Chalabi, the former US favourite, replaced by Allawi. And behind all this is persistent bureaucratic infighting involving the CIA, who are attacked by the neoconservatives and others as being responsible (in some way not easily defined) for the whole Iraq mess. Kristol and the neocon ideologists who were the most vehement about the need to go to war with Iraq want to find any scapegoat to evade their responsibility for the mess. Disarray at the top reflects the quagmire on the ground.

From a purely military point of view the occupation is of course sustainable almost indefinitely. In Vietnam the US lost 58,000 killed in action, had hundreds of planes shot down by the North Vietnamese and nearly 2000 airmen taken prisoner. The average daily combat deaths between 1964 and 1972 was around 20 a day, and several times more than that during the height of the fighting, roughly 1966-9. Losses in Iraq are nothing like these figures. But the raw figures conceal some uncomfortable realities.

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The two Iraq wars, as well as the intervention in Yugoslavia, have accustomed the US public to virtually casualty-free wars. The 1300-plus troop deaths are at this relatively low level because of the vastly improved application of 'medivac' technology and practices; in other words, in Iraq a lot more wounded soldiers survive than did in Vietnam. But there have been over 10,000 wounded, and many of them have had terrible, maiming, injuries. Sooner or later the continuing casualties will deepen the backlash among the civilian population.

Against that, the Bush administration cannot possibly withdraw from Iraq. It must continue to seek partners in a new puppet government and it must continue to try to strike blows against the resistance. In all likelihood this means deepening disillusionment in the US, and deepening anger among the people of Iraq.

In such a situation there is every reason for the anti-war movement internationally to deepen its efforts, and especially to prepare for the international mobilisation on March 19.

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