

Colonizing Iraq: The Obama Doctrine?

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Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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Here's how reporters Steven Lee Myers and Marc Santora of the New York Times described the highly touted American withdrawal from Iraq's cities last week:

"Much of the complicated work of dismantling and removing millions of dollars of equipment from the combat outposts in the city has been done during the dark of night. Gen. Ray Odierno, the overall American commander in Iraq, has ordered that an increasing number of basic operations — transport and re-supply convoys, for example — take place at night, when fewer Iraqis are likely to see that the American withdrawal is not total."

Acting in the dark of night, in fact, seems to catch the nature of American plans for Iraq in a particularly striking way. Last week, despite the death of Michael Jackson, Iraq made it back into the TV news as Iraqis celebrated a highly publicized American military withdrawal from their cities. Fireworks went off; some Iraqis gathered to dance and cheer; the first military parade since Saddam Hussein's day took place (in the fortified Green Zone, the country's ordinary streets still being too dangerous for such things); the U.S. handed back many small bases and outposts; and Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki proclaimed a national holiday — "sovereignty day," he called it.

All of this fit with a script promisingly laid out by President Barack Obama in his 2008 presidential campaign. More recently, in his much praised speech to the students of Egypt's Cairo University, he promised that the U.S. would keep no bases in Iraq, and would indeed withdraw its military forces from the country by the end of 2011.

Unfortunately, not just for the Iraqis, but for the American public, it's what's happening in "the dark" — beyond the glare of lights and TV cameras — that counts. While many critics of the Iraq War have been willing to cut the Obama administration some slack as its foreign policy team and the U.S. military gear up for that definitive withdrawal, something else — something more unsettling — appears to be going on.

And it wasn't just the president's hedging over withdrawing American "combat" troops from Iraq — which, in any case, make up as few as one-third of the 130,000 U.S. forces still in the country — now extended from 16 to 19 months. Nor was it the re-labeling of some of them as "advisors" so they could, in fact, stay in the vacated cities, or the redrawing of the boundary lines of the Iraqi capital, Baghdad, to exclude a couple of key bases the Americans weren't about to give up.

After all, there can be no question that the Obama administration's policy is indeed to reduce what the Pentagon might call the U.S. military "footprint" in Iraq. To put it another way, Obama's key officials seem to be opting not for blunt-edged, Bush-style militarism, but

for what might be thought of as an administrative push in Iraq, what Vice President Joe Biden has called “a much more aggressive program vis-à-vis the Iraqi government to push it to political reconciliation.”

An anonymous senior State Department official described this new “dark of night” policy recently to Christian Science Monitor reporter Jane Arraf this way: “One of the challenges of that new relationship is how the U.S. can continue to wield influence on key decisions without being seen to do so.”

Without being seen to do so. On this General Odierno and the unnamed official are in agreement. And so, it seems, is Washington. As a result, the crucial thing you can say about the Obama administration’s military and civilian planning so far is this: ignore the headlines, the fireworks, and the briefly cheering crowds of Iraqis on your TV screen. Put all that talk of withdrawal aside for a moment and — if you take a closer look, letting your eyes adjust to the darkness — what is vaguely visible is the silhouette of a new American posture in Iraq. Think of it as the Obama Doctrine. And what it doesn’t look like is the posture of an occupying power preparing to close up shop and head for home.

As your eyes grow accustomed to the darkness, you begin to identify a deepening effort to ensure that Iraq remains a U.S. client state, or, as General Odierno described it to the press on June 30th, “a long-term partner with the United States in the Middle East.” Whether Obama’s national security team can succeed in this is certainly an open question, but, on a first hard look, what seems to be coming into focus shouldn’t be too unfamiliar to students of history. Once upon a time, it used to have a name: colonialism.

Colonialism in Iraq

Traditional colonialism was characterized by three features: ultimate decision-making rested with the occupying power instead of the indigenous client government; the personnel of the colonial administration were governed by different laws and institutions than the colonial population; and the local political economy was shaped to serve the interests of the occupying power. All the features of classic colonialism took shape in the Bush years in Iraq and are now, as far as we can tell, being continued, in some cases even strengthened, in the early months of the Obama era.

The U.S. embassy in Iraq, built by the Bush administration to the tune of \$740 million, is by far the largest in the world. It is now populated by more than 1,000 administrators, technicians, and professionals — diplomatic, military, intelligence, and otherwise — though all are regularly, if euphemistically, referred to as “diplomats” in official statements and in the media. This level of staffing — 1,000 administrators for a country of perhaps 30 million — is well above the classic norm for imperial control. Back in the early twentieth century, for instance, Great Britain utilized fewer officials to rule a population of 300 million in its Indian Raj.

Such a concentration of foreign officialdom in such a gigantic regional command center — and no downsizing or withdrawals are yet apparent there — certainly signals Washington’s larger imperial design: to have sufficient administrative labor power on hand to ensure that American advisors remain significantly embedded in Iraqi political decision-making, in its military, and in the key ministries of its (oil-dominated) economy.

From the first moments of the occupation of Iraq, U.S. officials have been sitting in the

offices of Iraqi politicians and bureaucrats, providing guidelines, training decision-makers, and brokering domestic disputes. As a consequence, Americans have been involved, directly or indirectly, in virtually all significant government decision-making.

In a recent article, for example, the New York Times reported that U.S. officials are “quietly lobbying” to cancel a mandated nationwide referendum on the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) negotiated between the United States and Iraq — a referendum that, if defeated, would at least theoretically force the immediate withdrawal of all U.S. troops from the country. In another article, the Times reported that embassy officials have “sometimes stepped in to broker peace between warring blocs” in the Iraqi Parliament. In yet another, the military newspaper Stars and Stripes mentioned in passing that an embassy official “advises Iraqis running the \$100 million airport” just completed in Najaf. And so it goes.

Segregated Living

Most colonial regimes erect systems in which foreigners involved in occupation duties are served (and disciplined) by an institutional structure separate from the one that governs the indigenous population. In Iraq, the U.S. has been building such a structure since 2003, and the Obama administration shows every sign of extending it.

As in all embassies around the world, U.S. embassy officials are not subject to the laws of the host country. The difference is that, in Iraq, they are not simply stamping visas and the like, but engaged in crucial projects involving them in myriad aspects of daily life and governance, although as an essentially separate caste within Iraqi society. Military personnel are part of this segregated structure: the recently signed SOFA insures that American soldiers will remain virtually untouchable by Iraqi law, even if they kill innocent civilians.

Versions of this immunity extend to everyone associated with the occupation. Private security, construction, and commercial contractors employed by occupation forces are not protected by the SOFA agreement, but are nonetheless shielded from the laws and regulations that apply to normal Iraqi residents. As an Iraq-based FBI official told the New York Times, the obligations of contractors are defined by “new arrangements between Iraq and the United States governing contractors’ legal status.” In a recent case in which five employees of one U.S. contractor were charged with killing another contractor, the case was jointly investigated by Iraqi police and “local representatives of the FBI,” with ultimate jurisdiction negotiated by Iraqi and U.S. embassy officials. The FBI has established a substantial presence in Iraq to carry out these “new arrangements.”

This special handling extends to enterprises servicing the billions of dollars spent every month in Iraq on U.S. contracts. A contractor’s prime responsibility is to follow “guidelines the U.S. military handed down in 2006.” In all this, Iraqi law has a distinctly secondary role. In one apparently typical case, a Kuwaiti contractor hired to feed U.S. soldiers was accused of imprisoning its foreign workers and then, when they protested, sending them home without pay. This case was handled by U.S. officials, not the Iraqi government.

Beyond this legal segregation, the U.S. has also been erecting a segregated infrastructure within Iraq. Most embassies and military bases around the world rely on the host country for food, electricity, water, communications, and daily supplies. Not the U.S. embassy or the five major bases that are at the heart of the American military presence in that country.

They all have their own electrical generating and water purification systems, their own dedicated communications, and imported food from outside the country. None, naturally, offer indigenous Iraqi cuisine; the embassy imports ingredients suitable for reasonably upscale American restaurants, and the military bases feature American fast food and chain restaurant fare.

The United States has even created the rudiments of its own transportation system. Iraqis often are delayed when traveling within or between cities, thanks to an occupation-created (and now often Iraqi-manned) maze of checkpoints, cement barriers, and bombed-out streets and roads; on the other hand, U.S. soldiers and officials in certain areas can move around more quickly, thanks to special privileges and segregated facilities.

In the early years of the occupation, large military convoys transporting supplies or soldiers simply took temporary possession of Iraqi highways and streets. Iraqis who didn't quickly get out of the way were threatened with lethal firepower. To negotiate sometimes hours-long lines at checkpoints, Americans were given special ID cards that "guaranteed swift passage... in a separate lane past waiting Iraqis." Though the guaranteed "swift passage" was supposed to end with the signing of the SOFA, the system is still operating at many checkpoints, and convoys continue to roar through Iraqi communities with "Iraqi drivers still pulling over en masse."

Recently, the occupation has also been appropriating various streets and roads for its exclusive use (an idea that may have been borrowed from Israel's 40-year-old occupation of the West Bank). This innovation has made unconvoyed transportation safer for embassy officials, contractors, and military personnel, while degrading further the Iraqi road system, already in a state of disrepair, by closing useable thoroughfares. Paradoxically, it has also allowed insurgents to plant roadside bombs with the assurance of targeting only foreigners. Such an incident outside Falluja illustrates what have now become Obama-era policies in Iraq:

"The Americans were driving along a road used exclusively by the American military and reconstruction teams when a bomb, which local Iraqi security officials described as an improvised explosive device, went off. No Iraqi vehicles, even those of the army and the police, are allowed to use the road where the attack occurred, according to residents. There is a checkpoint only 200 yards from the site of the attack to prevent unauthorized vehicles, the residents said."

It is unclear whether this road will be handed back to the Iraqis, if and when the base it services is shuttered. Either way, the larger policy appears to be well established — the designation of segregated roads to accommodate the 1,000 diplomats and tens of thousands of soldiers and contractors who implement their policies. And this is only one aspect of a dedicated infrastructure designed to facilitate ongoing U.S. involvement in developing, implementing, and administering political-economic policies in Iraq.

Whose Military Is It?

One way to "free up" the American military for withdrawal would, of course, be if the Iraqi military could manage the pacification mission alone. But don't expect that any time soon. According to media reports, if all goes well, this isn't likely to occur for at least a decade. One telltale sign of this is the pervasive presence of American military advisors still embedded in Iraqi combat units. First Lt. Matthew Liebal, for example, "sits every day

beside Lt. Col Mohammed Hadi," the commander of the Iraqi 43rd Army Brigade that patrols eastern Baghdad.

When it comes to the Iraqi military, this sort of supervision won't be temporary. After all, the military the U.S. helped create in Iraq still lacks, among other things, significant logistical capability, heavy artillery, and an air force. Consequently, U.S. forces transport and re-supply Iraqi troops, position and fire high-caliber ordnance, and supply air support when needed. Since the U.S. military is unwilling to allow Iraqi officers to command American soldiers, they obviously can't make decisions about firing artillery, launching and directing U.S. Air Force planes, or sending U.S. logistical personnel into war zones. All major Iraqi missions are, then, fated to be accompanied by U.S. advisors and support personnel for an unknown period to come.

The Iraqi military is not expected to get a wing of modern jet fighters (or have the trained pilots to fly them) until at least 2015. This means that, wherever U.S. air power might be stationed, including the massive air base at Balad north of Baghdad, it will, in effect, be the Iraqi air force for the foreseeable future.

Even the simplest policing functions of the military might prove problematic without the American presence. Typically, when an Iraqi battalion commander was asked by New York Times reporter Steven Lee Myers "whether he needed American backup for a criminal arrest, he replied simply, 'Of course.'" John Snell, an Australian advisor to the U.S. military, was just as blunt, telling an Agence France Presse reporter that, if the United States withdrew its troops, the Iraqi military "would rapidly disintegrate."

In a World Policy Journal article last winter, John A. Nagl, a military expert and former advisor to General David Petraeus, expressed a commonly held opinion that an independent Iraqi military is likely to be at least a decade away.

Whose Economy Is It?

Terry Barnich, a victim of the previously discussed Falluja roadside bombing, personified the economic embeddedness of the occupation. As the U.S. State Department's Deputy Director of the Iraq Transition Assistance Office and the top adviser to Iraq's Electricity Minister, when he died he was "returning from an inspection of a wastewater treatment plant being built in Falluja."

His dual role as a high official in the policy-making process and the "top advisor" to one of Iraq's major infrastructural ministries catches the continuing U.S. posture toward Iraq in the early months of the Obama era. Iraq remains, however reluctantly, a client government; significant aspects of ultimate decision-making power still reside with the occupation forces. Note, by the way, that Barnich was evidently not even traveling with Iraqi officials.

The intrusive presence of the Baghdad embassy extends to the all-important oil industry, which today provides 95% of the government's funds. When it comes to energy, the occupation has long sought to shape policy and transfer operational responsibility from Iraqi state-owned enterprises of the Saddam Hussein years to major international oil companies. In one of its most successful efforts, in 2004, the U.S. delivered an exclusive \$1.2 billion contract to reconstruct Iraq's decrepit southern oil transport facilities (which handle 80% of its oil flow) to KBR, the notorious former subsidiary of Halliburton. Supervision of that famously mismanaged contract, still uncompleted five years later, was allocated to the U.S.

Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction.

The Iraqi government, in fact, still exerts remarkably little control over “Iraqi” oil revenues. The Development Fund for Iraq (whose revenues are deposited in the Federal Reserve Bank of New York) was established under U.N. auspices just after the invasion and receives 95% of the proceeds from Iraq’s oil sales. All government withdrawals are then overseen by the U.N.-sanctioned International Advisory and Monitoring Board, a U.S.-appointed panel of experts drawn mainly from the global oil and financial industries. The transfer of this oversight function to an Iraqi-appointed body, which was supposed to take place in this January, has been delayed by the Obama administration, which claims that the Iraqi government is not yet ready to take on such a responsibility.

In the meantime, the campaign to transfer administration of core oil operations to the major oil companies continues. Despite the resistance of Iraqi oil workers, the administrators of the two national oil companies, a majority bloc in parliament, and public opinion, the U.S. has continued to pressure the al-Maliki administration to enact an oil law that would mandate licensing devices called production-sharing agreements (PSAs).

If enacted, these PSAs would, without transferring permanent ownership, grant oil companies effective control over Iraq’s oil fields, giving them full discretion to exploit the country’s oil reserves from exploration to sales. U.S. pressure has ranged from ongoing “advice” delivered by American officials stationed in relevant Iraqi ministries to threats to confiscate some or all of the oil monies deposited in the Development Fund.

At the moment, the Iraqi government is attempting to take a more limited step: auctioning management contracts to international oil companies in an effort to increase production at eight existing oil and natural gas fields. While the winning companies would not gain the full discretion to explore, produce, and sell in some of the world’s potentially richest fields, they would at least gain some administrative control over upgrading equipment and extracting oil, possibly for as long as 20 years.

If the auction proves ultimately successful (not at all a certainty, since the first round produced only one as-yet-unsigned agreement), the Iraqi oil industry would become more deeply embedded in the occupation apparatus, no matter what officially happens to American forces in that country. Among other things, the American embassy would almost certainly be responsible for inspecting and guiding the work of the contract-winners, while the U.S. military and private contractors would become guarantors of their on-the-ground security. Fayed al-Nema, the CEO of the South Oil Company, spoke for most of the opponents of such deals when he told Reuters reporter Ahmed Rasheed that the contracts, if approved, would “put the Iraqi economy in chains and shackle its independence for the next 20 years.”

Who Owns Iraq?

In 2007, Alan Greenspan, former head of the Federal Reserve, told Washington Post reporter Bob Woodward that “taking Saddam out was essential” — a point he made in his book *The Age of Turbulence* — because the United States could not afford to be “ beholden to potentially unfriendly sources of oil and gas” in Iraq. It’s exactly that sort of thinking that’s still operating in U.S. policy circles: the 2008 National Defense Strategy, for example, calls for the use of American military power to maintain “access to and flow of energy resources vital to the world economy.”

After only five months in office, the Obama administration has already provided significant evidence that, like its predecessor, it remains committed to maintaining that “access to and flow of energy resources” in Iraq, even as it places its major military bet on winning the expanding war in Afghanistan and Pakistan. There can be no question that Washington is now engaged in an effort to significantly reduce its military footprint in Iraq, but without, if all goes well for Washington, reducing its influence.

What this looks like is an attempted twenty-first-century version of colonial domination, possibly on the cheap, as resources are transferred to the Eastern wing of the Greater Middle East. There is, of course, no more a guarantee that this new strategy — perhaps best thought of as colonialism lite or the Obama Doctrine — will succeed than there was for the many failed military-first offensives undertaken by the Bush administration. After all, in the unsettled, still violent atmosphere of Iraq, even the major oil companies have hesitated to rush in and the auctioning of oil contracts has begun to look uncertain, even as other “civilian” initiatives remain, at best, incomplete.

As the Obama administration comes face-to-face with the reality of trying fulfill General Odierno’s ambition of making Iraq into “a long-term partner with the United States in the Middle East” while fighting a major counterinsurgency war in Afghanistan, it may also encounter a familiar dilemma faced by nineteenth-century colonial powers: that without the application of overwhelming military force, the intended colony may drift away toward sovereign independence. If so, then the dreary prediction of Pulitzer Prize-winning military correspondent Thomas Ricks — that the United States is only “halfway through this war” — may prove all too accurate.

A professor of sociology at Stony Brook State University, Michael Schwartz is the author of *War Without End: The Iraq War in Context* (Haymarket Books), which explains how the militarized geopolitics of oil led the U.S. to dismantle the Iraqi state and economy while fueling a sectarian civil war. Schwartz’s work on Iraq has appeared in numerous academic and popular outlets. He is a regular at TomDispatch.com. (An audio interview with him on the situation in Iraq is available by clicking here.) His email address is m...@optonline.net.

[Michael Schwartz’s Note on Further Reading: For daily regular and reliable information about the now hard-to-keep-track-of situation in Iraq, you should go to Juan Cole’s indispensable Informed Comment, Antiwar.com, and Truthout. They all get you the news of the day and much more. For more focused and often in-depth information on specific topics, keep track of what is posted on Dahr Jamail’s website, on Ben Lando’s ever useful Iraq Oil Report, and read anything by Patrick Cockburn at the (London) Independent. Two of my favorite, though only occasional, commentators on things Iraqi are Badger at Missing Link and Reider Visser at Historiae. Both seem to have information and offer analyses that don’t appear elsewhere.]

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