

Forget the Headlines: Iraqi Freedom Deferred

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Global Research, July 08, 2009

8 July 2009

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As US combat troops redeployed to the outskirts of Iraqi cities on June 30, well-staged celebrations commenced. The pro-US Iraqi government declared “independence day” as police vehicles roamed the streets of war-weary Iraq in an unpersuasive show of national rejoicing. US mainstream media joined the chorus, as if commemorating the end of an era.

Meanwhile, top US administration and army officials cautioned Iraqis of their own recklessness. “Biden Warns Iraq About Reverting to Sectarian Violence,” read a New York Times headline. “What will it take to make a good exit from Iraq ?” inquired a Kansas City Star analysis. But missing from news headlines and commentary was any indication of direct US responsibility for the genocide that has befallen Iraq .

How can one claim that US ambitions in Iraq have altered if the ongoing legacy in Iraq is being perceived as a strategic mistake, rather than a moral one?

One thing remains the same, for sure: and that is the arrogance that has long permeated US relations with Iraq . “The president and I appreciate that Iraq has traveled a great distance over the past year, but there is a hard road ahead if Iraq is going to find lasting peace and stability,” said Vice President Biden during a visit to Baghdad on July 3rd. Biden’s remarks were saturated with the same hubris that defined the former administration’s attitude towards Iraq for years: ‘we did our share, that of liberating you, and now its your turn to take charge of your own security’, type of rhetoric. “It’s not over yet,” Biden said. Ironically, he is right, since that could only mean the complete withdrawal of US troops from Iraq , the end of foreign meddling in the country’s affairs, and the removal of corrupt politicians that have destroyed the country’s national identity in favour of sectarian camps endlessly fighting for dominance and privilege. Indeed, it’s anything but over.

It’s true that the majority of Americans now accept the once rebuked claim that the Iraq war was predicated on a lie, and readily blame former President Bush for drawing the country into a costly war that should have never happened. President Obama’s arrival has seemingly ushered in a new discourse of honesty and national introspection.

Although one wants to believe that the new administration is sincere in seeking an exit strategy from Iraq , one is hardly sure that the US is ready to divorce itself from the war-scarred country. There is little reason, aside from tactical redeployment, that should compel antiwar sentiments to weaken, or self-respecting commentators to halt their questioning of US intentions.

The terms “exit” and “exit strategy” are now dominating media discourse regarding Iraq . Some attribute this new language to the new administration. The odd fact is that the recent US army redeployment is not the brainchild of the Obama administration, but a provision of

a November 2008 agreement signed between the Iraqi government of Nouri Al Maliki and the Bush administration. Talk of exiting Iraq indeed preceded the entrance of Obama. The new US administration simply honoured previous commitments. As per official statements, following the June 30 redeployment, the US is expected to reduce its forces by 50,000 troops by August 2010, and then many of those remaining by the end of 2011.

So, 2012 will witness a fully independent Iraq , right? Wrong. "Many studying Iraq believe the US will end up negotiating with Baghdad to establish a couple of permanent military bases," writes Matt Schofield. "Those could be essential to leaving behind a stable government, a military loyal to the nation and capable of defending it, and a country that has the backing of the people." Those who wish to decipher such deceptive language should comprehend the permanent US military presence as permanent occupation. Indeed, the US doesn't have to be present on every Iraqi street corner to officially occupy the country. The sectarian Iraqi army and police - US armed and trained - should be enough to carry out US wishes in Iraq (under the guise of fighting terrorists), while the US will "stand ready, if asked and if helpful, to help in that process," as explained by Biden.

Iraq headlines will eventually fade away, making space for the new escalation in Afghanistan , also in the name of fighting terror, bringing democracy and all the rest.

The faces of the victims will be hidden so as not to harm our sensibilities, and causality figures will be manipulated, contested and at times blamed on the coward terrorists who hide among civilians. In other words, the US will take the spirit of its Iraq war to Afghanistan , remain in Iraq - as inconspicuous as possible - so as to hold onto its strategic military achievement, and, if necessary, blame both nations for their growing misfortunes.

However, before we take our eyes off Iraq , Americans must remember their own culpabilities in what transpired there. Antiwar activists and people of conscience must not forget that 130,000 US soldiers remain in the country; that the US has complete control over Iraqi airspace and territorial water; that there is not yet a reason to celebrate and move on. Even if one is trusting enough to believe the administration and army's own account of its future in Iraq, one should recall comments made by Admiral Mike Mullen last February: "Mr. Obama plans to leave behind a 'residual force' of tens of thousands of troops to continue training Iraqi security forces, hunt down terrorist cells and guard American institutions."

One may be truly eager to see a sovereign, democratic and stable Iraq , but such hopes must not occur at the expense of truth and common sense.

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