

Iraq “After” the War: What is Iraq’s Future? What are America’s Intentions?

Part II

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President Obama emphasizes that he ended the Iraq campaign but he actually fulfilled the withdrawal agreement to pull out by the end of 2011 that was signed in December 2008 by outgoing President Bush and the Baghdad government. The Bush Administration labored long to compel President Nouri al-Maliki to agree that many thousands of U.S. troops could remain in the country after the bulk of forces withdrew, but the Iraqi leader ultimately refused. As a compromise the concord contained a stipulation allowing U.S. troops to remain if requested by Iraq’s government.

The Obama Administration then applied pressure on Maliki to “request” that 20,000 or so American troops remain indefinitely, but its plans fell through in October. Reflecting the views of the Iraqi people, Baghdad politicians insisted that only a small number of troops may remain to train the Iraqi army. They added, however, that the troops would now be subject to the Iraqi legal system if they broke laws. The U.S. does not permit this in the many countries where its military is stationed. Washington thus was obliged to give up on retaining the troops.

The decision was an important setback for the Obama administration but a victory for Iraqi independence and a most agreeable outcome for neighboring Iran, which has considerable influence in Iraq. Washington’s principal concern is that Shi’ite Iran and majority Shi’ite Iraq will in time enter in a close and relatively powerful alliance that would oppose U.S. hegemony in the Persian Gulf, perhaps backed by China and Russia.

According to IPS news analyst Gareth Porter Dec. 16: “The real story behind the U.S. withdrawal is how a clever strategy of deception and diplomacy adopted by Prime Minister Maliki in cooperation with Iran outmaneuvered Bush and the U.S. military leadership and got the United States to sign the U.S.-Iraq withdrawal agreement.”

Iran, which supported Bush’s overthrow of Ba’athists, is a country against which Washington has held a grudge since 1979 when a popular revolution ousted the Shah of Iran, occupied the U.S. embassy in Tehran and held 62 American personnel for 14 months. The Shah was reinstalled on the Peacock Throne in 1953 by the U.S. and UK after they arranged for a monarchist coup against the democratically-elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh, crushing Iranian democracy but denationalizing the country’s petroleum fields to benefit British and American oil companies.

The U.S. and Israel (which had very close relations with the Shah’s regime) have long been seeking the opportunity to replace the anti-imperialist Islamic regime with a pro-American

government, lately with threats of war, subversion, support for opposition elements, and ever tightening extreme sanctions in response to unproven allegations that Iran is constructing a nuclear weapon.

Obama told the troops that “Iraq is not a perfect place... but we’re leaving behind a sovereign, stable and self-reliant Iraq, with a representative government that was elected by its people.... This is an extraordinary achievement... and today we remember everything that you [the troops] did to make it possible.”

After the first false justifications for the invasion were exposed, and the Pentagon was settling in for a long occupation since notions of quick victory had had gone up in smoke like a bombed out Iraqi home, Bush Administration neoconservatives discovered that the “real” reason for the war was to “democratize” Iraq.

Iraq had been a one-party state run by the secular Ba’ath Party with Saddam Hussein as the president. Hussein crushed the Communists, then the left and other vocal opponents and organizations. The Ba’athists brooked no political opposition. They favored the minority Sunni over the majority Shi’ite Muslims. Hussein led Iraq into an unjust, unnecessary war against Shi’ite Iran throughout the 1980s, with U.S. backing.

Domestically, the Ba’athists embraced a program of social services for the people. Oil reserves and certain enterprises had been nationalized and profits provided a broad array of support for the masses, such as subsidized food. Iraq boasted the best public educational system in the Middle East. It maintained a far-reaching national healthcare system for all citizens. Iraqi women were considered to be the most equal and liberated in the Arab world. Internationally, the Ba’ath Party practiced an anti-imperialist foreign policy. For many years it upheld Pan-Arabism until its decline throughout the region, and was critical of Israel and supported the Palestinian people until the end.

Historically the U.S. supported and continues to back several dictatorships in the Middle East. It’s 30-year tacit alliance the Mubarak regime in Egypt (and current backing for the quasi-military junta now in power) was hardly the worst. What set Iraq apart for Washington was its strategic geopolitical position, opposition to certain U.S. goals in the vicinity, possession of great petroleum resources, anti-Israel focus, and by 2003 its helpless military vulnerability.

Today after 20 years of U.S. wars, Iraq is a ruin. The country was virtually crippled after the destruction caused by Washington’s first Iraq war in 1991 followed by debilitating sanctions and occasional bombings until the second war which started in March 2003.

The education system has been shattered. Healthcare is now poor to nonexistent for much of the population. Many rights for women have been wrenched away. Infrastructure is a wreck. Energy from the battered electrical grid remains sporadic or not available. Businesses and a number of government tasks have now been privatized to the detriment of the people. Oil has been denationalized. Poverty and inequality are widespread. Corruption is endemic. The new “democratic” political system is frequently undemocratic, and great injustices exist throughout society. Torture is a frequent tool of the police.

In addition, Washington’s divide-and-conquer tactics have greatly exacerbated religious tensions, leading to near civil war at one point, and engendered the continual terrorist violence that exists to this day. The war opened the door for al-Qaeda terrorists to enter Iraq

for the first time, and they are still there. The Ba'athists in power would not tolerate their presence, but the chaos of the occupation was a virtual invitation. Divide-and conquer also increased national and gender antagonisms.

America's formal war is now over but it hardly is the last of the U.S. in Iraq. Obama told the troops that "We're building a new partnership between our nations." The Bush Administration's initial "partnership" was based on becoming a virtual behind-the-scenes government in Baghdad — one of its many failures.

But Washington retains considerable power in Iraq — from economic support and credits, to arms sales, military training, trade opportunities, a connection to America's many allies and dependencies in the Middle East and worldwide and more.

Part of that partnership is the newly built largest embassy in the world and a staff of nearly 17,000. This includes a security force of over 5,000 personnel, and 150-200 U.S. troops remaining in Iraq as part of a "normal embassy presence." (By comparison, the capital city of Albany, N.Y., with a population of nearly 100,000, is served by 340 police officers.) It has been reported that much of the diplomatic staff works with Iraqi government departments or is engaged in activities for the U.S. intelligence network.

Iraqi Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, long a critic of the U.S. occupation and a friend of Iran, argues the embassy contingent and security detachments are far too large, indicative of Washington's intention to play a major role in Baghdad. He told Al-Arabiya TV Nov. 3 that the "American occupation will stay in Iraq under different names."

The embassy's main responsibilities seem to be to keep the new Iraqi government in check, to protect American commercial interests, to monitor and diminish Iranian influence, to distance Iraq from present-day Syria, to keep China and Russia at bay, to contact dissidents, to gather intelligence and to discourage Iraqi criticism of Israel.

The Obama Administration is strengthening the U.S. military machine in the wake of events in Iraq. Secretary of State Clinton announced recently: "We will have a robust continuing presence throughout the region, which is proof of our ongoing commitment to Iraq and to the future of that region."

The Associated Press reported that Defense Secretary Leon Panetta " expects about 40,000 U.S. troops to be stationed across the Middle East after they are pulled out of Iraq." The Pentagon wants to station some in Kuwait, next to Iraq, and intends to keep a substantial force in Afghanistan after the 2014 withdrawal, close to Iran and China. In addition the U.S. Navy is expected to increase the number of warships in the region.

The New York Times reports that "the administration is also seeking to expand military ties with the six nations in the Gulf Cooperation Council — Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman. While the United States has close bilateral military relationships with each, the administration and the military are trying to foster a new "security architecture" for the Persian Gulf that would integrate air and naval patrols and missile defense."

Ironically, these six oil-rich U.S. allies, led by ultra-reactionary Saudi Arabia, offer their people less freedom and rights for women than Iraq under the Ba'athist government, but neither Washington nor the mass media single them out for criticism or demonize their

leaders.

Iraq's future is a great unknown. The Sunni-Shi'ite split is far worse today than before Washington interfered. The immediate crisis is that the political system seems ready to explode. As the New York Times reported Dec. 20:

"The Shiite-dominated government ordered the arrest of the Sunni vice president [Tariq al-Hashimi] accusing him of running a death squad that assassinated police officers and government officials.... A major Sunni-backed political coalition said its ministers would walk off their jobs." Speaking later in the day from the safety of the Kurdish north (where he intends to stay for the time being), Hashimi "angrily rebutted charges that he had ordered his security guards to assassinate government officials, saying that Shi'ite-backed security forces had induced the guards into false confessions." Three of the guards confessed to the charges and the video was played on nationwide TV.

Even before this latest predicament, Washington's imposed "democracy" obviously was very fragile. Some quarters have predicted a possible future civil war or an eventual three-way separation of the country into Kurd, Sunni and Shi'ite territories, a situation that would not necessarily displease the Obama Administration if the Iraqi government cannot be brought to heel, particularly in relation to Iran.

The Iraqi military is loyal to the Maliki government, but its deportment in relation to successor regimes or in a serious political crisis hasn't been tested. It cannot be ignored that it has been trained, equipped and influenced by the Pentagon, which would be derelict had it not developed close ties to elements in the command apparatus. The semi-independent Kurds in the north are protected by the U.S. now. Their goal is complete independence in what they call Kurdistan. America will use them as a wedge, but it has sold out Kurd aspirations before and may do so again if conditions warrant.

The U.S. can still stir up lots of trouble in Baghdad by siding with and financing this or that political faction, religious community or ethnic group — a practice at which it has become adept. It has the entire country under intense air, sea and land surveillance, with spies and informants in every branch of government, political party and the military. Key telephones are tapped and computers are hacked. The entire region is encircled with U.S. military might.

The U.S. government does not intend to let Iraq get away, unless it becomes a subordinate ally. Now one knows what comes next.

In many ways — despite one-party rule and a ruthless leader capable of tragically counterproductive decisions (the invasions of Iran and Kuwait, for instance) — the masses of Iraqi people were better off before America's two decades of pain, destruction and chaos. The Bush and Obama Administrations, echoed by the mass media, have always sought to depict the majority of Iraqis as favorable to the occupation, but this was merely propaganda aimed at domestic public opinion. Most Iraqis are very happy the U.S. is finally gone, but of course they are worried about what the future holds.

They have been living in a hell, and are now closer to emerging, but still have many problems to overcome before they break out.

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