

Legalizing Occupation: Bush's Last Manoeuvre in Iraq

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When US forces descended on Baghdad five years ago, they seemed unstoppable. Military arrogance had reached an all time high, and it seemed only a matter of time before the same frenzied scenario took place in Teheran, Damascus, and elsewhere.

As it turned out, festivities began dwindling almost as soon as they were pronounced. One could argue that the day Saddam's status was toppled was the very same day that the US army faced its real battle in Iraq, one that continues to hinder long-term strategic planning, if not the once-touted US Middle East project altogether.

Five years of continuous and unrelenting blood baths may have toned down Bush's expectations. The lonely crusader who once vowed to fight tyranny at any cost is now trying to secure a treaty that would indefinitely secure US interests in Iraq. His administration may essentially be hoping to achieve what it regards as the best possible outcome of a worst possible situation.

Co-opting the UN has helped secure temporary legitimacy to the occupation. The international body, once rendered irrelevant, became a major hub for American diplomacy seeking to legitimise its occupation in a country that refuses to concede. Even willing Iraqi leaders, perfectly rehearsed elections and mass suppressions have failed to bring the desired stability and validation.

Of course, White House, State Department and US military spokespeople ventured into endless predictable talk about democracy, freedom, liberty and security in order to woo an increasingly agitated American public. But US action on the ground spoke of another reality: an imperial quest, with monopoly on violence and disregard of international law, the national sovereignty of Iraq and near total disregard of the human rights of its citizens.

Now the Bush administration is ready to crown its Iraq travesty with a long-term strategy that would turn Iraq's occupation into a lasting one. The US is 'negotiating' a treaty with the Iraqi government, one that would replace the UN mandate and legalise the US occupation of Iraq permanently.

Basically, time is running out for Bush. If no treaty is reached by the end of the year, his administration could find itself pleading to the Security Council for another extension of the mandate. This would be an embarrassing and dangerous scenario for US diplomacy because it would allow Russia and China to re-emerge as important players wielding fearsome veto powers.

By signing a long-term treaty, the Bush administration would pre-empt any action by a future Democratic president of Iraq.

When the UN Security Council voted unanimously to extend the US-led multinational forces in Iraq in November 2005, the US celebrated the decision as a sign of international commitment to Iraq's political transition.

John Bolton, US ambassador to the UN at the time, had repeatedly lambasted the UN and now saw "the unanimous adoption of this resolution (as) a vivid demonstration of broad international support for a federal, democratic, pluralistic and unified Iraq." After this the Pentagon said the "US planned to cut the numbers of troops next year." Since then, the opposite has actualised. Iraqi troops failed their first serious test — in failing to crack down on Al Mahdi army — and US forces grew in numbers.

In order for the US to sign a long-term strategic treaty with the Iraqi government, it needs a level of stability. The US military should be able to macro-manage Iraq as troops relegate to their permanent bases — 50 according to a report by Patrick Cockburn in the UK Independent — while their Iraqi allies give an illusion of sovereignty in dealing with day-to-day life in Iraq. The US' dilemma is that this coveted stability is nowhere in sight.

Since late 2007, officials in the US, the UN and Iraq have asserted that they have no intention of seeking another UN mandate. The US-Iraq treaty is thus the only option that will legalise the American occupation. The idea of the treaty is to give the impression that the relationship between the two is not that of the occupied and the occupier, but two sovereigns with mutual interests and equitable rights.

Iraqis are, unsurprisingly, furious about US expectations from the treaty. According to Cockburn, "Iraqi officials fear that the accord, under which US troops would occupy permanent bases, conduct military operations, arrest Iraqis and enjoy immunity from Iraqi law, will destabilise Iraq's position in the Middle East and lay the basis for unending conflict in their country."

Iraqi cabinet spokesman Ali Al Dabbagh was quoted by Iraqi TV as saying that government will not compromise on Iraq's sovereignty and is committed to "safeguarding Iraq's full sovereignty in line with international resolutions."

Although it is difficult to believe in Prime Minister Al Maliki's commitment to 'full sovereignty,' one cannot underestimate the pressure he faces at the parliament — fractious alliances, nationalists from various backgrounds, unstable Shia front, sceptical Sunni leadership. Aljazeera reported on how two of these legislators testified to the House Foreign Affairs subcommittee that, "US troops should leave Iraq before talks on a long term security pact could be completed."

Khalaf Al-Ullayan, the founder of the National Dialogue Council wants talks delayed "until there is a new administration in the United States," the exact scenario that the Bush administration is hoping to avoid. The US wants an agreement by July, one that would be hard to reverse even by a Democratic president.

To avoid embarrassment, "it's entirely possible that the Bush Administration, sometime this summer, will force the hapless regime of Prime Minister Maliki to submit to a US diktat on a US-Iraq accord." (Robert Dreyfuss, The Nation). "If Maliki signs the accord, and ignores the

opposition from parliament, he would instantly lose whatever remaining credibility he has left as an Iraqi leader," which would lead to more violence in Iraq at the eve of US elections. "Not a pleasant scenario," asserts Dreyfuss.

One can argue that no pleasant scenarios are possible in Iraq at any time under a US military presence. Iraq's past treasures were squandered immediately after its 'liberation' by US forces, and its present is daunted by bloodshed and uncertainty. The Bush administration now wants to ensure that the country's future is also compromised by violence, humiliation and war.

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