

One Last Chance for Sanity in Iraq

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US President George W Bush's new war strategy due to be officially announced on Wednesday, which will likely meet an uphill battle at the now Democrat-controlled Congress, is a slap in the face of the majority of American voters, and indeed the democratic process.

The majority of American voters made their voices heard loud and clear in November when they voted out Bush's archaic thinking, a mixture of old imperialist ideas, bent on territorial accumulation and strategic positioning, notwithstanding misguided religious beliefs.

According to the latest public opinion polls, nearly three out of four US respondents now say they disapprove of Bush's handling of Iraq, while confidence in his overall leadership has fallen to record lows.

Bush is yet to learn, however, that the United States is not Rome, and strengths and weakness are no longer measured alone by a nation's number of combatants. The past three and a half years of utter failure in Iraq should have been the sign any rational leader would need to change course; but few ever argued that the president is an icon of leadership or even-headedness; thus the "new" Iraq strategy.

Just one day after the leadership of the US Congress was handed over to the victorious Democrats, after many years of absence, Bush began to reshuffle his war generals in a way that is consistent with neither the wishes of the American people nor the majority of Congress.

Though the Iraq strategy was scheduled to be laid out officially on Wednesday, early signs show that the president intends to beef up his war efforts and perhaps prepare for a new showdown, this time with Iran.

An early ominous sign came when Bush signaled his intentions for a troop surge in Iraq, with an additional 20,000-40,000 soldiers to bolster the 140,000 already on the ground. Bush insists that such a dramatic increase is temporary and will only come about when he receives guarantees from the current Iraqi government - a puppet government by any standards - that it is willing to take charge and play its part.

Expectedly, many Democratic members of Congress, and even some members of Bush's own Republican Party, are opposed to such a move. That rejection was articulated in an open letter released on Friday, written by the new leaders of Congress, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid. "Adding more combat troops will only endanger more Americans and stretch our military to the breaking point for no strategic gain. And it would undermine our efforts to get the Iraqis to take responsibility for their own future," Pelosi and Reid wrote.

Bush is also expected to request US\$100 billion in addition to the \$75 billion already approved by last year's Republican-led Congress, to fund US military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan in fiscal 2007.

Disgruntled Democrats are not alone in objecting to Bush's imprudent proposal; the military leadership also finds it reckless and futile. Therefore, top army brass Generals George Casey and John Abizaid, who are deeply skeptical regarding increasing troop numbers in Iraq, are on their way to be replaced by war supporters.

General David Petraeus, a war supporter who participated in the March 2003 invasion of Iraq, is set to take over from Casey as the top ground commander.

Moreover, the president reportedly intends to endorse William Fallon to head US Central Command. The choice of Fallon, according to Tim Reid, The Times of London's reporter in Washington, as the top military commander in the Middle East - to replace Abizaid - came as a big surprise to the Pentagon, for the former is a naval officer with little experience in that region.

But things will fall neatly in place when one considers that Bush's choice has more to do with Iran than repairing the damage done in Iraq: "Any mission against Tehran would rely heavily on carrier-based aircraft and missiles from the Persian Gulf," according to The Times, and the expertise of Fallon is most needed in that type of military scenario.

But boosting the number of US troops at a time when the US Army seems to be stretched to its maximum is not an easy job, even for the can-do president. Military analysts suggest that Bush can only successfully make up his force surge by extending tours and resorting to the reserve. Both moves will likely increase the number of US casualties at a higher rate than the present - keeping in mind that to date more than 3,000 US soldiers have been killed in the war - and will make the war bill a whole lot more expensive - about \$350 billion has been spent without even an emblematic constructive outcome.

Most of the new troops will be positioned in Sunni areas in Baghdad and al-Anbar province, seen as the heart of the resistance. Only a naive person would argue that such a stratagem would lead to anything other than greater bloodshed and further enlivening and validating the so-called insurgents.

Although the "Sunni insurgency" remains the prime target of the US military in Iraq, there is a growing realization among US officials and war generals that the unruly Shi'ite militias and their death squads are a greater cause of instability and violence.

Ironically, the rise of the Shi'ite militias was an early US strategy that put the many Shi'ite factions on a crash course with the Sunni resistance: thus dividing and weakening the Iraqis and lowering the risk of American casualties.

Now that the Iraqi army and police are composed mostly from those same militant thugs, many Iraqis find themselves victimized by their supposed national army and police force. Those who are expecting Iraqis to "take responsibility for their future" seem oblivious to the fact that the future of Iraq is most bleak under the current US-devised sectarianism where Sunnis are murdered with impunity and Shi'ites are blown up in their markets.

The humiliating execution of former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein at the hands of masked Shi'ite guards purporting to be an executive arm of a legitimate government was indeed the

last attestation that will forever categorize the ongoing strife in Iraq as one between Shi'ite and Sunni, the former allied to invading foreigners and the latter fighting for mere survival.

The fact that the inner Iraqi strife is now categorically defined according to sectarian lines, Bush must realize that the situation in Iraq has reached a point of unprecedented sensitivity, and his macho politics and infamous stubbornness can lead only to further disasters. His actions this week and expected moves to follow will lead to a situation that neither his party nor the Democrats with their blurred policy outlook can repair.

Bush must immediately provide a roadmap for withdrawal from Iraq to be carried out in stages to allow for synchronized, constructive regional and international roles that will engage the United Nations, the Arab League and, most important, all Iraqi social groups; otherwise, a divided Iraq with all the ills and regional mayhem it will bring about will remain an inescapable last option.

Ramzy Baroud's latest book, The Second Palestinian Intifada: A Chronicle of a People's Struggle (Pluto Press), is available at Amazon.com and also from the University of Michigan Press. His website is ramzybaroud.net

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