

The Shi'ites' Faustian pact

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In Najaf, the holy Shi'ite city, the grand ayatollahs are busy advancing a religious agenda: Ali al-Sistani, Mohammad Ishaq al-Fayad, Bashir al-Najafi and Mohammad Said Hakim compose the *al-marja' iyyah* (source of infallible authority on all religious matters). They are unanimous: the Shi'ite religious parties, the big winners in the elections, must implement Sharia (Islamic) law – and in fact this is one of the parties' top priorities. This does not mean that Sistani wants – or needs – to control an Iraqi theocracy: it means that the Shi'ite religious parties themselves – led by secular people – will give birth to an Iraqi Islamic republic.

Sistani's representatives have been stressing in the past few days that what matters for the grand ayatollah is equal rights for all. According to his senior aide, Mohammad al-Haboubi, the top priority in the writing of the future Iraqi constitution is “the preservation of the rights of all citizens, majority or minority, so they are all equal in the eyes of the law”.

Most Shi'ite scholars insist the Americans must stay away from the writing of the new constitution. Whether the Americans like it or not, Sharia law will prevail over civil law. What's left is a matter of degree: how deep will Sharia in Iraq rule over everything – apart from stating that women may not shake hands with men, music is allowed only “if it is not for enjoyment” and daughters inherit less than sons?

Sistani will have the last word as far as who will be the new Iraqi prime minister, not to mention the turbulent process of drafting the permanent constitution. He will refuse to allow the Kurds a veto power over the constitution – something they already have thanks to an administrative law passed by the Americans. Baghdad sources confirm that a key reason for Sistani to “bless” the Shi'ite-dominated United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) was that he was assured a primordial role in drafting the constitution. Moreover, Sistani himself is infinitely more popular and respected than the two main Shi'ite parties, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and the Da'wa Party. For the majority of Sunnis and even for some secular Shi'ites, they are Iranian agents: during the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, the SCIRI was on Iran's side, ie against Saddam. Without Sistani's “blessing”, these parties would never have been voted for en masse on January 30.

What about all that oil?

Abdel Mahdi, currently the finance minister and a member of the SCIRI, remains a strong contender for prime minister, alongside Ibrahim al-Jafaari of Da'wa.

On December 22, Mahdi – with US Under Secretary of State Alan Larson by his side – told the National Press Club in Washington in so many words, and to the delight of corporate US

oil majors, that a new oil law would privatize Iraq 's oil industry. The new law would allow investment in both downstream and "maybe even upstream" operations, meaning foreigners could become de facto owners of Iraqi oilfields. No wonder Mahdi has been touted by US corporate media as the next best candidate for prime minister after "the Americans' man", former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) asset and current Prime Minister Iyad Allawi.

Apart from an item by Inter Press Service at the time, Antonia Juhasz, a Foreign Policy in Focus scholar currently writing a book about the economic invasion of Iraq, has been the only one to sound alarm bells: Is it possible that Washington has made a deal - oil for power - with the SCIRI?

This is the fine print that President George W Bush's freedom rhetoric does not cover. Iraq may have a new "elected" National Assembly and a new Iraqi constitution may be written in the next few months. But the fact is that during 2005 the US remains in total control. Follow the money: US\$24 billion funded by American taxpayers toward the reconstruction, plus all the rules that have been passed by the US that control Iraq 's economy, plus the military occupation.

Both the billions of dollars and the maze of rules are controlled by auditors sitting in every Iraqi ministry for five years, all of them appointed (and controlled) by the Americans. The only thing that the Bush administration does not control in Iraq is unlimited, no-holds-barred access to oil - which anyone familiar with Vice President Dick Cheney's world view knows to be the key reason for the invasion and occupation of Iraq .

The whole point of an indefinite, muscular US military presence in Iraq (14 military bases, more than 100,000 troops, the massive embassy in Baghdad , the CIA -trained " Salvador option" death squads) would be to protect US corporate interests in the oil industry. But the possibility of a law privatizing Iraq 's oil coming to pass under a UIA-dominated government is less than zero - for two main reasons. In terms of Iraqi nationalism, this would spell political suicide to either the SCIRI or the Da'wa Party: most Shi'ites who voted in the elections, following Sistani's dictum, thought they were voting for the US to leave, for good. And in geopolitical terms, all the Shi'ite religious parties have close connections with Iran , which, encircled by the US from the east (Afghanistan) and west (Iraq), would find innumerable creative ways to turn the Americans' lives into a living hell.

One of the key - if not the key - challenges for the new Iraqi government will be a US demand to negotiate a SOFA (Status of Forces Agreement), the agreement that stipulates the legal status of US garrisons. A cursory look at a world map will teach Iraqis to be extremely careful not to fall into a trap. There are insistent rumors in Baghdad that a SOFA will not be negotiated in 2005: the responsibility will fall to the permanent government that will be elected next December. This is one more indication of the irrelevance of the new elected government. The Pentagon anyway has already determined it will keep 120,000 troops in Iraq into at least 2007, even if a withdrawal is demanded tomorrow.

Predictably, the Shi'ites don't want the US military to leave - at least for now. Ibrahim al-Jafari, the Da'wa Party leader and strong contender for one of the three top posts, has repeatedly said this would lead to a bloodbath. But both Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, the SCIRI's No 1, and interim President Ghazi al-Yawer, a Sunni, agree: the US military must begin a substantial withdrawal by the end of 2005.

Shi'ite firebrand Muqtada al-Sadr is just waiting to pounce. It's increasingly possible that the Sadrists who contested the elections may capture something like 7% of the seats in the new assembly. They've already said they will demand an immediate timetable for total US withdrawal. Muqtada wants the Americans out and he wants them out now. That's also exactly what disgruntled, religious Sunnis want. This spells a possible alliance between the Shi'ite urban proletariat and middle-class religious Sunnis - one more nail in the coffin of the myth propagated by the Bush administration that the resistance against the occupation is dominated by "terrorists". Significantly, Abdul Salam al-Kubaisi, the leader of the powerful Sunni Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS), has said he is in close contact with the Sadrists.

An extraordinary new development in Baghdad is that now the AMS is floating a clear proposal: we accept the new elected government as legitimate, as long as it sets a definitive timetable for US withdrawal. Although this is what the overwhelming majority of Iraqis want, nobody - no Shi'ite party, no Kurdish party, not even Sistani himself - is contemplating it at this stage. Baghdad sources tell Asia Times Online that the AMS would even issue a *fatwa* (religious edict) calling for the end of the resistance if the new government sets a date for US withdrawal in writing - with the United Nations as a watchdog. If true, that would certainly be the only way to lead the Baghdad sniper to retire his rifle.

What you want is not what you get

UIA spokesmen are saying that the Shi'ite alliance will capture half of the seats in the 275-member parliament, or a little less than 140 seats. They would need 182 to govern by themselves, without a coalition. The Kurds believe they will get about 65 seats: this only happened because the Sunni vote ranged from weak to non-existent. (Election results were due on Thursday, but were delayed over the re-examination of some ballot boxes.)

The consensus in rumor-filled Baghdad is that really bad news would mean the Shi'ites capturing 140 seats, the Kurds from 75 to 85 seats, and Allawi's list the rest. Sunnis in Baghdad are very gloomy: it looks like the bad-news scenario - a Shi'ite/Kurd landslide - is about to happen, with Kurds bragging they may have captured as many as 75 seats.

The UIA may be Shi'ite-dominated, but it contains more than 20 groups, movements and political parties - Christians, Turkomans, even Sunnis and Kurds, including the Badr Organization (the former Badr Brigades, trained by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards), the Hezbollah Movement in Iraq and the Islamic Union for Iraqi Turkomans.

The only Iraqi government that would have a minimum of stability would be a UIA/Kurdish alliance. It's very unlikely to happen, and even if it did it would send even moderate Sunni Arabs into open guerrilla mode. The Shi'ite religious parties in the UIA want Sharia law. The White House is relying on the Kurds to veto Sharia law. The relatively secular Kurds are obsessed with loose federalism and a fully fledged, autonomous Kurdistan province. They want nothing less than the presidency for Patriotic Union of Kurdistan leader Jalal Talabani.

The current foreign minister, the affable Kurd Hoshiyar Zebari, says that the only way to placate the Sunnis would be to offer them one of the key three posts - president, prime minister or Speaker of the National Assembly. It may not be enough. Sunni Arabs know the Kurds supported the war and occupation of Iraq and have been a de facto US protectorate for more than a decade. Sunni Arabs also know that the only indigenous allies the

Americans have at the moment are the Kurdish tribes: the Kurdish 36th Command Battalion, for instance, helped the marines to attack Sunni Arab Fallujah. Many Sunnis, even moderate, consider the Kurds traitors.

What the Kurdish tribal chiefs really want is the ultimate prize: they want independence (it could even be some kind of US-Israeli protectorate) and they want Kirkuk 's oil. All of this, for them, is non-negotiable. Supposing Turkey – a key North Atlantic Treaty Organization ally dreaming of being accepted by the European Union – buries the Kurdish dream, and the Americans cannot deliver, it's fair to assume that even the Kurds will abandon the Americans.

Meanwhile, in a Najaf still under piles of rubble there's widespread fear that in the end the same former CIA asset Allawi will continue to be prime minister. Allawi has been controlling Iraqi security for more than six months now. His new Iraqi National Guard is a remix of Saddam's security – and not by any coincidence infested with Saddam's men: after all, Allawi is also a former Ba'athist.

As the Bush administration needs a ruthless Iraqi police state to fight not only the resistance but all kinds of emerging protests against the appalling living conditions throughout the country, Allawi is indeed "the Americans' man", as he is known in Baghdad. His tough-guy profile will be his main argument to convince the UIA he should remain as premier. But Baghdad sources tell Asia Times Online that this is all cosmetic anyway: only the terminally naive may believe that the Washington-Green Zone axis is not controlling the selection of the top three posts.

No surrender

The Bush administration script is well known: Iraq was "liberated" from "tyranny" and the "insurgents" are fighting democracy – of which the elections were the first manifestation. These are the facts: Iraq was conquered, not liberated; the new government will not have any say in economic and oil issues; and the resistance fights the occupying power, not democracy.

Sistani sold the elections to the pious Shi'ite masses as the first step toward the end of the occupation. In the next few months his promise will be subjected to a groundbreaking reality test. Shi'ites at the polls unmistakably said that they were voting to expel the Americans, not to legitimize them.

If the Kurds get too much power, if the Shi'ite list disintegrates, if the US keeps building its sprawling military bases – which means they will be in Iraq for the long run, supported by puppet governments – the Sunni resistance will definitely become a national, Sunni-Shi'ite resistance. As for "terrorism", according to Baghdad sources, an overwhelming number of moderate, secular Sunnis and Shi'ites are convinced that "arch terrorist" Abu Musab al-Zarqawi is being exploited in a CIA black-ops designed to exacerbate ethnic tensions.

Many Israeli and American intellectuals and officials are already busy preparing global public opinion, calling for an independent Kurdistan . One of the top-flight propagandists is ambassador Peter Galbraith, one of the negotiators of the Dayton accords and currently a professor at the National War College . Independence is what the Kurdish leadership wants. Kurds hate the idea of Iraq : the Iraqi flag is practically forbidden in some remote mountainous areas. Kurds refuse to hand the control of their borders to Arab troops from

Baghdad . Former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger is enthusiastically calling for a Kurdistan , a Sunni center and a Shi'ite south. Why not three weak countries instead of one strong, united Iraq ? It's divide and conquer all over again.

The key reason for the war was control of Iraqi oil, supported by the installation of strategic US military bases. The key question now is which Iraqis will embrace the agenda of the Bush administration. Secular, moderate Sunni observers in Baghdad simply cannot believe the Shi'ite leadership will maintain public support for the rest of the year without telling the Americans to leave.

Moreover, the majority of Iraqis – those who voted and especially those who didn't – are not willing to surrender their oil, their economy and their land to corporate America . The popular resistance, on a national level, tends only to increase. Shi'ites – from Sistani to the SCIRI – better not enter into a Faustian pact.

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