

US occupation of Iraq: An ongoing criminal enterprise

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Recent media reports on the mounting evidence of wholesale corruption in US reconstruction efforts in Iraq are symptomatic of the criminal nature of Washington's war and occupation from their inception nearly six years ago. These crimes are continuing under the Obama administration, with no end in sight.

Citing unnamed senior government officials and court documents, the *New York Times* reported Sunday that federal investigators have turned their sights on two senior US military officers who were in charge of contracting out reconstruction projects in Iraq in the aftermath of the March 2003 invasion.

Those named as subjects of the probe are Col. Anthony B. Bell, now retired from the Army, who was in charge of reconstruction contracting in Iraq in 2003 and 2004, and Lt. Col. Ronald W. Hirtle of the Air Force, who functioned as a top contracting officer in Baghdad in 2004.

According to the *Times*, information about multimillion-dollar payoffs and bribes involving the office where the two men worked was supplied by Dale Stoffel, an American arms dealer who was shot to death in Iraq in late 2004, shortly after becoming a key witness for US investigators.

Citing two senior federal officials, the newspaper reports that Stoffel "drew a portrait worthy of a pulp crime novel: tens of thousands of dollars stuffed into pizza boxes and delivered surreptitiously to the American contracting offices in Baghdad, and payoffs made in paper sacks that were scattered in 'dead drops' around the Green Zone."

The investigation covers "a period when millions of dollars in cash, often in stacks of shrink-wrapped bricks of \$100 bills, were dispensed from a loosely guarded safe in the basement of one of Saddam Hussein's former palaces," the *Times* reports. It adds, "Former American officials describe payments to local contractors from huge sums of cash dumped onto tables and stuffed into sacks as if it were Halloween candy."

Among the other cases cited by the newspaper are those of Army Maj. John Cockerham, who "pleaded guilty to accepting nearly \$10 million in bribes as a contracting officer," and that of a civilian contracting official who "committed suicide in 2006, a day after admitting to investigators that she had taken \$225,000 in bribes to rig bids" in favor of a private firm.

Obviously, this official corruption was just the tip of the iceberg. If US companies were willing to pay hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars in bribes, it was because they themselves could steal tens or even hundreds of millions once they secured

government-paid reconstruction projects.

In some cases these contracts were awarded to major politically connected corporations, like Halliburton, formerly headed by then-Vice President Dick Cheney, and Bechtel. In others, it would appear, they went to those willing to pay the biggest bribes.

In an article published Monday, Patrick Cockburn, the veteran Middle East correspondent for the British daily *Independent*, points to the report issued at the beginning of this month by the US Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR) entitled "Hard Lessons," and suggests that out of the \$125 billion in US funds supposedly directed to Iraqi reconstruction, as much as \$50 billion may have gone missing.

This, he writes, would make it "the greatest fraud in US history... an even bigger theft than Bernard Madoff's notorious Ponzi scheme."

There is, however, a definite connection between these two forms of fraud and theft. Madoff's financial operations were no mere aberration. Rather, they were part and parcel of the semi-criminal financial manipulation that served over the whole recent period as a means of effecting a vast redistribution of wealth from the masses of working people all over the globe to a narrow financial elite.

This same wealthy layer served as the key social constituency for the policy of aggressive-i.e., criminal-war implemented by the Bush administration with the aim of imposing US hegemony over the strategic oil producing regions of the Persian Gulf and Central Asia.

Billions of people all over the planet are now paying the price for these crimes, both financial and political. Nowhere is this truer than in Iraq.

While Washington and much of the media routinely crow about a supposed "return to normalcy" in Iraq, the conditions facing the country's 28 million people remain appalling.

The human toll from nearly six years of US occupation is estimated, according to the most credible surveys, at over one million dead. According to the International Office on Migration, 2.8 million Iraqis are internally displaced persons, forced from their homes by the violence, and another 2.4 million are refugees who fled the country.

Having decimated Iraq's infrastructure with the "shock and awe" bombardment of March 2003 and more than a decade of punishing economic sanctions that preceded it, Washington has done next to nothing to rebuild the country outside of efforts to reconstitute its security forces as a puppet army of repression. Instead, the so-called reconstruction effort has consisted of a massive looting operation by corporations awarded cost-plus contracts for work that in many cases was never done and in others done so badly as to be worthless.

Given that the SIGIR is headed by one Stuart Bowen, a former Bush aide from Texas who was part of the legal team that stole the 2000 election, it can be safely assumed that its findings cover up more than they reveal. Nonetheless, its reports provide a damning glimpse of the corruption, waste, brutality and incompetence that have characterized US operations in Iraq.

In one recent report, the SIGIR examines the work of a Defense Department task force assigned to focus on stimulating economic development by restarting former Iraqi state-owned enterprises which before the war employed over 200,000 workers. The SIGIR found that after spending \$103 million, the task force “estimated a 24,500 jobs impact.” The report concluded however, that the Defense Department’s claim “does not provide a reliable basis” for estimating the actual number of people put back to work.

Another inspector general report concerns the reconstruction of a waste water treatment center demolished by the US military onslaught against the Iraqi city of Fallujah. It finds that after falling two years behind schedule and registering a tripling of total costs, the contractors had made no provisions to actually connect individual houses to the system. As a result, the report states, “Fallujah residents will not benefit from the wastewater treatment.”

The SIGIR report cites numerous similar cases in which projects were paid for several times over while remaining unfulfilled.

The result of this corruption and negligence is a continuing social catastrophe for the Iraqi people. According to a recent Oxfam report, the share of Iraqis without access to adequate water supplies rose from 50 percent to 70 percent from the start of the war to 2007.

According to the inspector general’s report, two-thirds of Baghdad’s sewage flows untreated into the city’s rivers and waterways, finding its way into the drinking water. The result is repeated deadly outbreaks of cholera and other diseases.

At least two-thirds of Iraqis are still plagued by inadequate power supplies as a result of the war’s destruction, with frequent and prolonged blackouts making normal economic and domestic life impossible.

The population remains mired in mass unemployment. According to official figures, 18 percent of Iraqis are jobless, with another 10 percent unable to find full-time employment.

Meanwhile, as part of the Status of Forces agreement reached last December between Washington and the regime in Baghdad, the US occupation forces are turning over as many as 17,000 detainees, the majority of them held without charges or trials, to Iraqi authorities, who are notorious for torturing prisoners. In so doing, the Obama administration is setting the stage for atrocities that will eclipse the horrors of Abu Ghraib.

The criminal US war in Iraq has not ended with the inauguration of President Barack Obama, and there are growing indications that it will continue even as his administration escalates the war in Afghanistan.

The architects and commanders of the military “surge” remain at their posts, from Bush’s defense secretary, Robert Gates, to Centcom chief Gen. David Petraeus and Gen. Raymond Odierno, the head of US occupation forces in Iraq. Increasingly, these military figures are making known their opposition to even the limited withdrawal proposed by Obama.

The latest to publicly voice an opinion is Lt. Gen. Frank Helmick, in charge of US training of Iraqi security forces, who told the *Financial Times* Monday that it would take until the end of 2011 to give these forces “a sustainable ground capability to fight the insurgency.” This follows open pressure by Petraeus and Odierno for Obama to drop his campaign pledge to withdraw US “combat troops” from Iraq within 16 months.

This plan always envisioned tens of thousands of US troops staying behind to conduct counter-insurgency operations and protect US interests in the country. The generals are reportedly urging Obama to merely reclassify large numbers of those now categorized as combat troops and keep them in Iraq as well.

It is clear that, in one form or another, the war and occupation in Iraq will go on. The fight to bring it to an end and to hold accountable those responsible for this criminal venture is a struggle against the Obama administration, which requires the independent political mobilization of the working class against the profit system, which is the source of militarism and war.

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