

Losing the Peace in Iraq

by William O. Beeman

Now the war with Iraq has been “won,” and the United States citizenry faces the sobering fact that we have a second nation in the Middle East under our care, after Afghanistan. Iraq has tumbled off the wall, and we are marshalling all of King George’s horses and men to try to put it together again. The effort is not going well. The infrastructure of the country is in shambles, multiple power centers are emerging, the American military is under attack, and the post-War administrators don’t seem to be able to get a toehold on security and order.

There is now no question that we will not be in Iraq for a short period of time. The promised short war is going to last for many years. As the occupation drags on, it will begin to affect our domestic policy as well. In this light, what to do with Iraq is now arguably our biggest foreign policy problem.

FROM INSPECTIONS TO WAR

Part of the task for the American occupation has been to find a justification for the war in the first place. “Weapons of Mass Destruction” poised for imminent deployment against the United States were the original reason for the pre-emptive war.

Hans Blix, the U.N. weapons inspector gave an extensive interview to the Spanish newspaper, *El País* on April 9 in which he made it clear that the United States’ claims that intelligence sources had proof of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq before the invasion of March 19, were doubtful at best.

Blix pointed out that U.S. intelligence services seemed to be collecting military reconnaissance information rather than evidence of weapons of mass destruction. This made it necessary for Blix to strictly delimit his activities to protect its integrity. The translation from the Spanish below is mine.

“The intelligence agents seemed to be collecting data that later were used to attack Iraqi military objectives. Therefore, when I was charged with the inspection effort, it was necessary to clarify the point: we would be an independent body. We would be able to receive information from the intelligence services. But this process would be a “one way street.” The intelligence services would contribute their data. And we would perform the verification of that data. I always told them that we were not going to “reward” them with new data collected by us. The greatest prize for those intelligence services and their Governments would be for us to find those weapons of mass destruction.... For example, to give them an idea whether the sources that had provided the information were valid or not. But that was all. This attitude did not please them.”

Blix, felt that this attitude was justified, because U.S. Intelligence could not be trusted to tell the truth about their information. Both information about atomic weapons development and mobile laboratories proved false. “Consider the case of the production of contracts for a presumed Iraqi purchase of enriched uranium from Niger. This was a crude lie. All false. And the information was provided to the International Atomic Energy Agency (OIEA) by the U.S. intelligence services. Speaking of the matter of the mobile laboratories, in attempting to verify the data that was passed on to us by the Americans, we only found some trucks dedicated to the processing and control of seeds and for agriculture.”

Blix went on to point out that once the Iraqis began to cooperate, after he delivered a rebuke to them at the United Nations on January 27, Americans began to be upset, and to criticize him. Finally, as the weather began to heat up, and the military operation began to be threatened by the weather, the United States completely lost patience in the inspection process and abandoned it.

When asked if he believed that weapons of mass destruction existed, he expressed cautious doubts. “I believe that the Americans began the war believing that they existed. Now, I believe less in that possibility. But, I do not know. Nevertheless, when one sees the things that the United States tried to do to show that the Iraqis had nuclear arms, such as the non-existent contract with Niger that I have already mentioned, one does have many questions.”

Blix’ doubts were subsequently confirmed by scientists who have turned themselves in to U.S. troops. Lt. General Amir al-Saadi, a special adviser who oversaw Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction programs, turned himself in, in Baghdad. In an interview with the German television network, ZDF, he insisted Iraq had no chemical or biological weapons and that there had been no justification for an attack on his country.

At this writing, no weapons of mass destruction have been found. If they are never found, this would make the second failed military mission since the September 11 tragedy. The first was the invasion of Afghanistan, ostensibly to destroy the Al-Qaeda network and capture Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar. Al-Qaeda is resurgent, by the admission of the Bush administration itself, and Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar remain at large.

THE EMERGING CHAOS

Iraq today is like the legendary Hydra, the monster who grew two new heads every time one was cut off. Having decapitated the Iraqi state, the Bush administration is now watching as the new heads, in the form of carpetbagging pretenders to office, spring up daily.

Chief carpetbagger is Ahmad Chalabi, self-appointed head of the Iraqi National Council, an overseas Iraqi resistance movement that emerged in the early 1990s. Mr. Chalabi, an American trained mathematician, has been a darling of the American right since the first Gulf War. At this writing he is about to be named a member of the five man council that will establish a new government in Iraq.

Arab leaders in the region, as well as the CIA have continually warned the White House that Chalabi is a thief, a charlatan, an incompetent and a poseur. He first appeared as an opposition leader following his embezzlement trial in absentia in Jordan in 1989. He was sentenced to 22 years in prison for stealing \$250 million from a series of businesses he controlled for the Petra Bank, Jordan’s third largest bank. It is tempting to view his emergence as a visible opposition leader in exile in conjunction with the missing money.

Despite his criminal background, it is easy to see why Richard Perle, Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld see him as the perfect leader for the New Iraq. He is a poster child for the Bush theory of the Iraqi reconstruction.

Following a meeting with State Department officials in April, 1993, he gave a talk, which outlined his views, before the right-wing neocon bastion, the American Enterprise Institute. Chalabi, who is a Shi’ite, said just what the then-nascent neocons who would populate the George W. Bush White House wanted to hear. He voiced opposition to Saddam, saying he could be easily defeated. He also expressed opposition to Iran, and advanced the theory that Iraq could easily develop democratic institutions. Asserting that Iraq’s middle class could be the “democratic core” of a new government, Chalabi said, “There is nothing in Islam that contradicts democracy.”

After arriving in Baghdad on April 21, he further endeared himself to the United States by denouncing the United Nations’ potential role in rebuilding Iraq. In doing this he repeated a cheap anecdote that surely came from Karl Rove’s office about Kofi Annan smoking a cigar with Saddam Hussein.

Chalabi is obviously a “good Muslim” in the White House view, as opposed to the Shi’a sheikhs that are fomenting demonstrations throughout the country, calling for America to go home. Although the Shi’a are the majority in the country, and would lead the nation were a truly democratic election held today, such a scenario is clearly in opposition to American long-term wishes. However, there is factional fighting among the Shi’ites as well.

It is not going to be easy to ignore the Shi’a population. Shi’a Muslims make up 60% of the population. Located primarily in the South of Iraq, the Shi’a population is loyal to religious leaders – Ayatollahs – who provide spiritual guidance for the community. Each believer chooses a religious leader to be a “leader worthy of emulation.” Because each believer has only one such leader, there are rivalries between different groups of followers. There are also ongoing tensions between religious and secular authorities.

Grand Ayatollah Ali Hussein Al-Sistani, arguably Iraq’s most revered Shi’a spiritual leader, gave an interview to the Arabic newspaper *Al Hayat* on April 18 through his son. Sistani’s son spoke of “serious dangers that are directed at the religious figures, and even his eminence As-Sayyid al-Sistani.”

Georgetown University Middle East scholar Daniel Brumberg, who provided a translation of the interview for the Columbia University Gulf2000 web site interprets this not as opposition to the United States, but to other Shi’ites who are trying to usurp Sistani’s authority.

One of those Shi’a rivals is Muqtada al-Sadr, one of the few surviving descendants of Ayatollah Mohamed Bakr al-Sadr, who was executed on Saddam Hussein’s orders in 1980.

Muqtada al-Sadr is only 22, but is a firebrand. Reporter Lara Marlowe of *The Ireland Times* quotes one Shi’ite in Baghdad: “The young people in Najaf follow Muqtada, but the older ayatollahs say he doesn’t have enough knowledge.” Because Muqtada is not yet an ayatollah, one can see why Ayatollah Sistani would decry his attempts at leadership.

U.S. troops arrested one of the Shi’a lieutenants, Shaikh Muhammad al-Fartusi and two other clerics at a Baghdad checkpoint when they gathered a huge crowd of Shi’ites in Baghdad to denounce the United States at Friday prayers. Al-Fartusi said in his sermon that the US could not impose a formal “democracy” on Iraq that allowed freedom of individual speech but denied Iraqis the ability to shape their own government. Al-Fartusi’s arrest provoked a big demonstration of 5,000 Shiites in front of the Palestine Hotel.

Mohammed Baqir Al-Hakim, the founder of the Council of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq (SCIRI) in 1982 is a recent arrival in Iraq. Like the other grand Ayatollahs, Al-Hakim comes from a respected Shi’a clerical lineage. He lived in Iran in exile for 20 years, and has many followers in both Iran and Iraq. He is worrisome to the Bush administration.

Finally, there are the American administrators. First on the scene was general Jay Garner, America’s chosen “viceroy” in Iraq. Garner, preferred to be called ‘co-coordinator of civilian administration.’ Conservative, and an outspoken supporter of right-wing Israeli political positions, he was less likely than any of the above Iraqi candidates to garner the support of the Iraqi public, except for one fact – he had all the money, and all the guns.

Garner proved to be ineffective. The famous looting of the Baghdad Museum, and the burning of the Central Library took place on his watch. Both events created a world-wide outcry. Utilities were non-functioning weeks after the invasion, chaos reigned in the streets, and the military was not trained or able to handle the peacekeeping. The thought that Garner, a former military man, could bridge the gap between military and civil administrations was clearly optimistic. L. Paul Bremer, a former State Department official and ambassador to Netherlands, who took over for Garner on May 7, was thought to be a better civil administrator.

Bremer has spent his first month mostly cleaning house. He dissolved the army, the Ba’ath party and most of the bureaucracy. Finally, the U.S. government has announced that rather than convene a national assembly to choose the organizing council the five members would be appointed. As mentioned, Chalabi would be one of them. The others are two top Kurdish leaders of northern Iraq: Jalal Talabani, head of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, or PUK; Massoud Barzani, head of the Kurdish Democratic Party, or KDP; Abdul Aziz al-Hakim of the Iran-based Supreme Council for Revolution in Iraq; and Ayad Allawi of the Iraqi National Accord, a group of defectors from Saddam Hussein’s forces.

Noticeably missing are any representatives from the Shi’a community, unless one counts Chalabi, who is not accepted by any of the Ayatollahs of Najaf. This is an astonishingly foolish administrative move, since it virtually guarantees that the majority population in the country will reject the suggestions made by this council.

The Bush administration, as well as the U.S. Congress has become nervous at the obvious power demonstrated by the Shi’ites in Iraq in the past few weeks. Their primary fear is that Iran might eventually control the Iraqi Shi’ite population. The Bush administration can not wean itself from the idea that states have primacy of power. Therefore they continually make the conceptual error that if the Shi’a become strong in Iraq they will be “controlled” by Iran. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Iranian government is not benefited in any special way if the Iraqi Shi’ites come to power. In fact, the Iranian clerics are disadvantaged. Most Shi’a Ayatollahs disagree profoundly with the philosophy of clerical rule promulgated by Khomeini. They all opposed him when he came to power, and will have no qualms about continuing their opposition to this philosophy from Iraqi territory.

In fact, the Shia community will only become a threat to America if Washington tries to disenfranchise it, and deny the right to elect leaders for Iraq. At that point the Shia will resist us. They have no intrinsic hostility to the United States, only to United States interference in their community affairs, which we seem to do quite often.

MEANWHILE, BACK IN KURDISTAN

The bright spot in Iraqi reconstruction is Kurdistan, but it may turn out to be the most troublesome area of all.

The Northern Kurdish region of the country is already called by its residents: The Islamic Republic of Kurdistan. Very few American forces actually entered the Kurdish zone, which remained under the control of the indigenous guerilla forces, the *pehmerga*. The British and American forces realized that there was no way to control the Kurdish region, and so, on May 23 they declared the permanent partition of Iraq. This will, in effect, establish the Kurdish state. The *pehmerga* are being allowed to keep their arms. They will be the new Kurdistan Army. The fact that the leaders of the two principal Kurdish powers were appointed to the five man governing commission only hastens the day when Kurdistan will be a separate entity.

One troublesome thought regarding a free Kurdistan: most of Iraq’s huge oil reserves are located there, and without the rest of Iraq, they are land-locked. Some very Kurdish politics lie ahead, and it is not clear who will conduct the negotiations.

The new governor of the Kurdish region, Nechirvan Barzani pointed out in *The New York Times* that the *pehmerga* are making excellent progress in securing all of Kurdish Iraqi territory, and they want to add the “other parts.” One presumes that the “other parts” include Kurdish inhabited territory in Turkey, Iran and Syria. Turkey is desperately opposed to the establishment of a Kurdish state, fearing uprisings and civil war in its own Kurdish population. The result is likely to be conflict throughout the region for decades to come.

DEMOCRACY BREAKING OUT OR BREAKING DOWN

Iraq was a terrible dictatorship, ruled by a cruel and down the majority of the population, it worked. Water and electricity flowed; salaries, though low, were paid; schools and universities were among the best in the region. At present, none of these things are functioning throughout the country.

Moreover, the promise of democracy establishing itself throughout Iraq is still a very distant vision. The establishment of a U.S. government appointed council does not look like the self-determination promised the Iraqi people by President Bush. The exclusion of the Shi’a from that council guarantees dissonance. The majority of the population. Further, the *de facto* separation of Kurdistan not only potentially deprives the rest of Iraq of income, but it is the basis for a war with Turkey.

More demoralizing for everyone is the inability of anyone at all to find a satisfactory justification for the war, beyond the desire to eliminate Iraq’s ruler. The nuclear, biological and chemical weapons of mass destruction have not

been found, and are not likely to be. The links between Saddam’s government and Al-Qaeda are non-existent. As time goes on, the intensity of feeling about the evils of the past will fade in the light of the struggles of the present. Within a generation, Saddam will grow in stature, and the Iraqis will curse the United States.

President George W. Bush promised the American people a quick and effective mission in Iraq. His father knew in 1991 that eliminating Saddam Hussein would not result in anything that could be finished quickly or neatly. That is why he left him in power. The neoconservatives who could not live with President Bush Sr.’s unfinished scenario should have also examined his original reasoning in stopping short of Baghdad. Their long plans for conquest at first succeeded, but have now turned into a Pyrrhic victory.

Perhaps the world is better off without Saddam – we did see the release of thousands of prisoners, and the sobering killing fields. However, it remains to be seen whether the survivors, the Iraqi people – and the American people – are going to be better off very soon as a result of this very messy adventure. ☞

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