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Iraq: A Bitter Strategic Failure

By: Robert Parry

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President Barack Obama and Iraqi leaders may try to sugarcoat the bitter pill for the United States by talking up the achievements of the six-year occupation, but the public celebrations by Iraqis marking the American pullout from Iraq's cities tell the painful story of a U.S. strategic failure.

Essentially, the Iraqis are serenading the American withdrawal with an Arabic version of “Na-na-nah-na, na-na-nah-na, hey, hey, hey, goodbye.”

Yes, it's true that 130,000 U.S. troops remain in Iraq, many shifted only miles to heavily fortified bases on the cities' outskirts, but the withdrawal from the cities – which Obama promises will be followed by a pullout of all combat troops by next August – has the distinct feel of an end game.

Those scenes of joyous Iraqis also represent another blow to the grandiose neoconservative scheme that sought to use sophisticated U.S. military power to tame the Middle Eastern countries that were regarded as hostile to Israel.

The U.S. invasion in March 2003 had other motives as well – from George W. Bush's personal animus toward dictator Saddam Hussein to making sure Iraq's oil resources would be available to U.S. oil companies – but perhaps the principal goal was the projection of American power deep into the Arab world, to strike at enemy states beyond Israel's limited military reach.

Some of the neocons who helped formulate Bush's Iraq War strategy had cut their teeth in the 1980s on Ronald Reagan's interventions in Central America, which used a compliant Honduras as a staging area for assaults on leftist-ruled Nicaragua and against peasant insurgencies in nearby El Salvador and Guatemala.

Viewing the Central American outcome as a success – despite the horrendous death toll – some of these neocons, such as Bush's deputy national security adviser Elliott Abrams, sought to apply those lessons to the Middle East, with Iraq playing the role of Honduras.

Neocon Dreams

In the neocon dreams, the invasion of Iraq would transform it into an ally of Israel and a base for pressuring regime change on other hard-line Muslim states, especially Syria and Iran.

A favorite neocon joke in 2003 was to ask whether to next hit Damascus or Tehran, with the punch-line, "Real men go to Tehran."

Then, once President Bush had compelled regime change in Syria and Iran, the neocons hoped support would dry up for Hezbollah in Lebanon and for Hamas in the Palestinian territories, freeing Israel to dictate terms to its Arab adversaries and thus bring a form of enforced peace to the region.

In early 2004, as the Iraqi insurgency was already gaining strength, I encountered this scheme while talking to a leading neocon intellectual who told me that he had heard from his friends inside the Bush administration that the invasion of Syria was just around the corner.

But the violence in Iraq and the Bush administration's inept war strategy soon made it clear that there would be no invasion of Syria – and that "real men" wouldn't make it to Damascus or Tehran at least not anytime soon.

Of course, these realpolitik motives behind the Iraq War were rarely even hinted at publicly, but this neocon idea of the United States achieving military dominion over the Middle East was always at the center of the Bush administration's thinking. It was in line with the imperial ambitions of the Project for the New American Century, which foresaw permanent U.S. military domination of the planet.

However, the human catastrophe unleashed by this neocon plan is hard to overstate. More than 4,300 U.S. soldiers have been killed along with estimates of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis. Also, more than 30,000 American troops were wounded or maimed.

And it is far from over. In the past few weeks, sectarian violence has been on the upswing, with bombs killing scores of Iraqis.

Yet, in part because of all this sacrifice, the public can expect politicians and pundits – especially those who cheered on the war – to insist the bloodshed was somehow worth it, that some good was achieved, that it was the right thing to depose and execute Saddam Hussein even if he didn't have those weapons of mass destruction, and that Iraq is in a better place than it was.

There is also the argument that the neocons achieved some measure of success for their private goal by crippling Iraq as a nation state and thus weakening the overall strength of Israel's Arab enemies. Yet, even that "achievement" must be balanced against the increased resentment of Israel and the United States throughout the region.

Uglier Reality

Yet, any happy talk about limited successes obscures a much uglier reality. Beyond the death and devastation, another casualty has been the delicate structure of international law, which couldn't stop President Bush and his "coalition of the willing" from setting their sights on a weak nation and unleashing hell on its people.

Relying on false intelligence and laughable legal theories, Bush justified launching what the New York Times may call an "[unnecessary war](#)" but what was in reality a "war of aggression," what the Nuremberg Tribunal after World War II deemed "the supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole."

And Bush's "war of aggression" did unpack many of those other crimes from the "accumulated evil of the whole," including the slaughter of civilians and extensive use of torture and sexual abuse against Iraqis who dared to resist their nation's occupier.

While those crimes were underway, major U.S. media outlets avoided stating the obvious because any recognition that Bush waged "a war of aggression" would force other conclusions, such as the need to subject him, his senior advisers and some foreign allies (i.e. Tony Blair) to a war crimes tribunal.

The big news organizations also didn't want to admit their own complicity in this crime since almost everyone in American journalism, who wanted to keep a comfortable seat at the Establishment's table, either endorsed the enterprise or kept quiet.

So even today – more than five months after Bush left office – it’s still much easier to dismiss what happened as “unnecessary,” to cite the pre-war “intelligence failures,” and to criticize Bush primarily for his tactical misjudgments in planning an effective occupation -- not committing enough troops and not having a detailed enough post-invasion plan.

Accusing him of criminality is much trickier. After all, in the view of the mainstream news media, war crimes are something that “rogue states” commit, petty tyrants from Rwanda or Yugoslavia who can then be dragged off to The Hague and put on trial.

Such humiliations are not for the former “Leader of the Free World” and his subordinates (nor for an ex-British prime minister). Instead, Bush gets to settle down with a fat pension, to be cheered at Texas Rangers baseball games, and to give paid speeches seated next to another former President, Bill Clinton.

At this point, chances of any serious accountability look slim to none. Though a vocal supporter of international law, President Obama has made it clear that he won’t tolerate any serious investigation of the Bush administration’s crimes. Obama says he wants “to look forward, not backward.”

As part of that ducking of the past, Obama also can be expected to avoid describing the war as a failure. That would only provoke Republicans and right-wing pundits to accuse him of defeatism and “apologizing for America.”

Instead, to protect the withdrawal’s political flanks, Obama will pretend that the sacrifice of American troops achieved great things in Iraq.

Deferring Truth

Under Obama’s approach, the truth of the bloody misadventure must be deferred as the 130,000 U.S. troops continue the schedule for departure, with combat troops to leave by next August and the final pullout of all troops by the end of 2011.

Still, some on the Right are already blaming Obama for this impending U.S. defeat in Iraq, even though it was Bush who accepted the “status-of-forces agreement” that set the timetable for the departure from the cities and for the final withdrawal of U.S. forces.

Bush had hoped to negotiate a SOFA that would permit an open-ended American occupation, thus locking his successor into an indefinite continuation of the war. But Prime Minister

Nouri al-Maliki issued a series of escalating demands regarding setting a timetable for a full U.S. withdrawal.

To get any SOFA at all for allowing American troops to remain legally after the end of 2008, Bush was forced to accept a deadline for the U.S. pullout, something that he had long resisted. The irony was that Bush's desire to use the SOFA to cement a long-term U.S. military presence in Iraq had the opposite result.

Given broad Iraqi opposition to the U.S. occupation, Iraqi political factions decided to position themselves as defenders of the nation's sovereignty, not as American puppets.

The likely outcome in Iraq now appears to be the departure of U.S. forces with Washington left with little to show for its investment in blood and treasure. As the Washington Post reported on June 30, "there is little talk among U.S. commanders and diplomats of engineering a victory in the 2½ years they expect to remain here."

As for Iraq, it seems doomed to continue as a country plagued by sectarian divisions. The Shiite majority can be expected to firm up ties with neighboring Shiite-ruled Iran; the Sunnis will remain resentful over their reduced status; and the Kurds will insist on their autonomous region in the north.

Whether a meaningful democracy can survive long amid these tensions – and after years of horrific violence – is doubtful. More likely might be a Balkanization of the country into sectarian enclaves or the emergence of another strongman in the mold of Saddam Hussein.

For the United States, memories of its military intervention in a country halfway around the world may fade gradually into history, swallowed by the shifting sands of the ancient land of Mesopotamia, another chapter of failed imperial overreach in that region, a long and bloody saga dating back to Biblical times.

Despite the terrible price in lives, money and prestige, little may remain of Bush's macho adventure besides the eventual recognition of a painful strategic defeat for the United States.