

Iraqi Withdrawal Symptoms

by ASHRAF FAHIM

In the aftermath of the Iraqi election, which had a respectably high turnout (58%) and which went off without the catastrophic violence some predicted, senior officials in the Bush administration have projected an air of self-righteousness befitting a condemned man who is exonerated just as the hangman is fastening his knot.

"The American military and our diplomats, working with our coalition partners, have been skilled and relentless, and their sacrifices have helped to bring Iraqis to this day," said Bush. With the wind seemingly at his back, Bush has dismissed any suggestion that a timeline be set for a US military withdrawal.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has been similarly swept up in the afterglow, miming British Lieutenant-General Sir Stanley Maude's famous proclamation in 1917 to the newly invaded Iraqis that "our armies do not come into your cities and lands as conquerors or enemies, but as liberators". Addressing troops in Baghdad on February 11, Rumsfeld said, "You have shown the world that America is, in fact, a land of liberators, not of occupiers."

It is worth noting, however, that the prophets of doom cautioned not only of the election's logistical obstacles, but the danger that Sunni Arabs would not participate, thereby deepening inter-communal tensions. That fear has been realized, with turnout extremely low in Iraq's majority Sunni Arab provinces.

Whatever the intent of the administration's rhetorical bravado, its unwillingness to contemplate a timeline for withdrawal, as demanded by nationalist Iraqis who boycotted the election, communicates a desire to pursue maximalist strategic goals.

The administration has been remarkably tone deaf to Iraqi fears that their country is destined to become an American colony, as demonstrated by Lieutenant-General James T Lovelace, the army's top operations officer. Lovelace announced just prior to the Iraqi election that the US Army would likely keep 120,000 troops in Iraq for at least two years. The administration's predictable contention that the assessment was just one possible contingency is unlikely to set Iraqi minds at ease.

While Rumsfeld has insisted that the election marks a "tipping point" in defeating the still-raging insurgency, there is little evidence that this is so. Violence has continued unabated since election day, and the US chairman of the Joint Chiefs told Congress on Thursday that insurgents were still conducting up to 60 attacks daily.

Nor has the election altered the broad consensus among Iraqis of the need to chart their future without foreign interference. It is only on the means of ending the American occupation where the Iraqi consensus frays.

Sunni or nationalist disenchantment?

The debate about how Iraq can best be stabilized has revolved around the widely held assumption that the Sunni Arabs, Iraq's formerly dominant class, are disenchanted by their loss of privilege but will join the political process if offered a plum seat at the table. It is also conventional wisdom that "moderate" Sunni Arabs can and must be separated from the "extremists".

"Detaching the Sunni mainstream from the hardcore terrorists is clearly the most critical challenge of the weeks ahead," declared the *New York Times* editorial page on January 31.

Both assumptions require qualification. It is not only disenfranchisement but opposition to American tutelage that riles Sunni Arabs. Their prerequisite for joining the political process is not just a piece of the pie, but a guarantee that America will leave, and soon. In addition, their disenchantment reflects pan-Iraqi anti-occupation sentiment.

The rejectionist view was concisely expressed by Muhammad al-Kubaysi, a member of the powerful Sunni Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS). "The elections are not a solution to the Iraqi problem, because this problem is not an internal dispute to be resolved through accords and elections," he told al-Jazeera. "It lies in the presence of a foreign power that occupies this country and refuses even the mere scheduling of the withdrawal of its forces from Iraq."

As the new Iraqi government takes shape, many observers have argued that the Sunni Arabs may now be eager to enter the political process before the train leaves the station. Numerous news reports have spoken of their willingness to get involved in writing Iraq's all-important constitution. But there are indications that those Sunni Arab leaders willing to do so are the same ones who participated in the election to such little effect.

The relative importance of those angling for a role was summed up by Dan Murphy of the *Christian Science Monitor*. "While some Sunni leaders who rejected the elections are now scrambling for a role in writing Iraq's constitution," he wrote, "they either don't control those carrying out the attacks or are allowing the bloodshed to continue."

This movement is being led by former Iraqi foreign minister Adnan Pachachi. The octogenarian Pachachi is frequently heralded as a Sunni Arab "elder statesman", but his party won a paltry 12,000 votes in the election. The other movement supporting involvement is the Iraqi Islamic Party, which began life as a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, and which has been riven by internal divisions on the merits of joining the political process.

The more influential AMS has conditioned participation in writing the constitution on a timetable for US withdrawal, a demand personally conveyed by AMS chairman Hareth al-Dari to the United Nations' Iraq representative, Ashraf Qazi. An identical demand was rejected by US Ambassador John Negroponte before the election, when the AMS offered to drop its election boycott. There is no sign that the US or indeed Iraq's interim leaders will be any more receptive to the AMS' offer this time around.

The question of the hour, however, is what position the major beneficiaries of the election, the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), backed by Shi'ite leader Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, will take toward the occupation and relations with the United States. The UIA, which won 140 of 275 seats in the new assembly, had made a timetable for US withdrawal part of its election

platform, but has not emphasized the issue since. And in order to form a government, the UIA will likely rely on the pro-US Kurdish parties, who are in no hurry to see the US go.

The presumed transitional prime minister, Ibrahim Jaafari of the Shi'ite Da'wa Party, part of the UIA, has been cautious in his assessment of the prospects for a US draw-down. "I think the security system needs time", Jaafari told CNN on Thursday.

Several factors could force the UIA's hand, however. Firstly, the Sunni Arab-dominated provinces have the ability to veto the constitution when it is put to a referendum in October by virtue of a provision put in place to protect Kurdish rights. Given this fortuitous leverage, Sunni Arabs and other nationalists could push for an end to US influence.

Secondly, there is public opinion. A recent poll by Zogby International found that 82% of Sunnis and 69% of the majority Shi'ites want a US withdrawal "either immediately or after an elected government is in place". The Bush administration may thus be making a serious miscalculation in presuming Shi'ite largesse.

Strong anti-occupation sentiment is held by several key Shi'ite political actors as well, notably junior cleric Muqtada as-Sadr, who withheld participation in the election for that reason. As-Sadr commands a sizeable following due to the legacy of his father, a venerated senior cleric murdered by Saddam Hussein. And he wasted little time after the election holding the senior clergy's feet to the fire. "I stood aside for the elections and did not stand against them as I did not want to show disobedience to the marjaiya [senior Shi'ite clergy]," he said in a statement. "I did not join these elections so that I would not become one of the West's pawns." As-Sadr also demanded the marjaiya now to ask US troops to leave.

The senior Shi'ite clergy are by no means unified in their hitherto quietist approach to the occupation. Najaf Ayatollah Ahmed al-Hassani al-Baghdadi issued a strong condemnation of the election on its eve, saying, "I am a son of Iraq, and I call on all Christians and Muslims to expel the Americans from Iraq."

Even members of the marjaiya, the highest Shi'ite religious authority, barely conceal their distaste for the US beneath a patina of pragmatism. Bashir Najafi, one of the four grand ayatollahs who make up the marjaiya was blunt in an interview with the *Washington Post*. US troops could remain at present he said. "There appear to be good relations" between US soldiers and the Shi'ites. But, "there are hidden aspects. It's like a snake: The skin is soft, but the snake is poisonous. The American soldiers are the skin, but the American policy is still on the inside."

Likewise, the long lines of exhilarated, defiant Iraqi voters expressed greater wariness of US intentions than gratitude at their supposed deliverance. One man, Ahmed Dujaily, an 80-year-old former minister under King Faisal II, put it succinctly in comments to the *New York Times*. "We thank the Americans for destroying the regime of Saddam," said Dujaily. But "we know what they are looking for. They are looking for oil, and military bases, and domination of the new regime."

There is little sign that the palpable anti-occupation groundswell is swaying hearts and minds at the White House. The Bush administration has yet to publicly address the issue of long-term military bases, or when it intends to bring the troops home. With Iraqis seemingly fractured along ethnic and denominational lines, the administration is apparently gambling

that it can yet shepherd the country into the kind of dependency relationship it has with other regional US allies.

"They ask me, 'is there a timetable for withdrawal from Iraq?'" said Bush at a recent rally. "Here's my answer to that: You don't set timetables. The timetable is as soon as possible, and it's going to be based on the willingness and capacity of the Iraqi troops to fight the enemy."

Bush's position would be reasonable were the Iraqi security forces not years from independence or unwilling to fight precisely because they don't want to be seen to be doing so at America's behest. The election has undoubtedly increased the legitimacy of the transitional process in Iraqi eyes, but the Iraqi military still lacks the esprit d'corps and ethnic diversity necessary to assert its authority over the country.

At the moment some estimates indicate that Iraqi forces are outnumbered by the insurgents. Anthony Cordesman, a military analyst for the conservative Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), estimated the number of Iraqi troops able to stand alone at only 4,500, as Fred Kaplan pointed out in Slate.com. Estimates of the number of active insurgents are put by the US military at about 17,000.

Iraq's interim leaders are cognizant of the weakness of their own forces, and have been unwilling to contemplate a US withdrawal. Interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi had hinted at a timetable prior to the election before reportedly backtracking under heavy US pressure. Immediately after the election, interim President Ghazi al-Yawar likewise called it "complete nonsense to ask the troops to leave in this chaos and vacuum of power".

Even if they could get a grip on the insurgency, Iraqi forces are far from being able to defend the country's borders, a prerequisite for withdrawal laid down by Bush during his February 2 State of the Union address. "Iraq has few, if any tanks or fighter planes," wrote Kaplan in Slate. "Nor is the US military training effort geared towards defending borders or repelling an invasion."

Concerns about Iraqi loyalty are likely playing a major part in the frugality of their US benefactors. Heavy weaponry could easily be turned on US troops, and actually arming the Iraqi army could loosen its dependence on the US. Those in search of history's echo need only rent a copy of Lawrence of Arabia. "Give them artillery and you've made them independent," Lord Dryden counsils General Allenby on how best to equip the Arab uprising against the Ottomans during World War I. "Then I can't give them artillery, can I?" replies Allenby.

Neglecting the Middle Way

Numerous creative solutions have been floated to the issue of US withdrawal, from the gradual transfer of power to a UN force, to giving the Iraqis a voice through a referendum on the US presence. "If the American presence has been divisive, a vote that asks us to leave could prove the opposite," wrote several CSIS analysts in the *New York Times*. The administration has yet to pursue any of these compromise solutions. Instead, it continues to attempt to square the circle of Iraqi anti-occupation sentiment with its own economic and military prerogatives, which may or may not coincide with Iraq's.

There is, of course, a mandated end to the US occupation, stipulated in UN Security Council Resolution 1546. That resolution says the US presence will conclude at the end of 2005, or earlier if the Iraqi government demands it. Even the venerable, pro-US Adnan Pachachi has despaired of America's unwillingness to reaffirm this vow. "What we wanted from the Americans was a clear statement to the effect that they would abide by this resolution," he has commented. "But they refused to do so, so it seemed the suspicions of the [Iraqi] people have some basis in fact."

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