

The United States in Iraq: power without authority

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Created 2003-06-03 23:00

In the approach to the war in Iraq the US military rapidly expanded its strength across the Gulf region – most notably in Kuwait, Jordan, Qatar, the Emirates and Oman, as well as in the Persian Gulf itself. This process followed the major build-up of forces in the wider region as a consequence of the war in [Afghanistan](#) [0] in late 2001.

Thus, with US bases and forces ensconced in Afghanistan, Pakistan and some of the [Central Asian](#) [0] republics (such as [Uzbekistan](#) [1]), the overall picture was one of a remarkable presence across the Persian Gulf and Caspian basin regions – parts of the world distinguished by their massive oil reserves.

Such a presence contrasted with the view from the civilian leadership at the Pentagon which believed that the United States armed forces, especially the army, could maintain international security without having the need for very large numbers of troops based overseas. There might well be a need for large numbers of bases, but most of these could be maintained on a “stand-by” basis, ready for use when needed, with the overall [trend](#) [1] being towards smaller US forces capable of rapid deployment when required.

To some extent this projection had already gone awry before the Iraq war, as it was already proving necessary to keep over 10,000 troops in [Afghanistan](#) [1] because of the risk of a resurgent Taliban, but even these commitments pale almost into insignificance as the true nature of the commitment to Iraq becomes clear.

A dangerous vacuum

At the level of political organisation in Iraq, it is already becoming clear that the setting up of a stable client regime in Baghdad is going to take time, and that the initial stages involve a process of appointment of political advisers that will remain under the strict control of the occupying powers.

A foretaste of this was the sudden political change in Basra last week (see William Booth, “Chafing at Authority In Iraq”, [Washington Post](#) [2], 30 May 2003). Immediately after the war, occupation forces pointed to the early appointment of a city council in Basra as an indicator of rapid progress on the political front. This appearance of progress has now been halted, with the British authorities summarily dismissing the council on the grounds that it was unrepresentative and too closely linked to Ba’ath party elements.

Instead, there would be no more than an advisory role for some appointees, an outcome decried by Basra professionals who, according to the [Washington Post](#):

“...say they are being treated like children by the occupation forces and denied true liberation. They say the Americans and British have spoken often of freedom and

democracy, but have failed to find a way to meaningfully integrate Iraqis into decision-making positions.”

Basra [3] is only part of the story. In Iraq as a whole there has been an abrupt, significant change in American policy. The original plan of the US occupation authority was to bring together several hundred representatives of the country’s religious, ethnic and cultural groups in a major conference in July 2003 to advise on the early establishment of a political authority that could take responsibility for issues such as health and education.

This plan has now been abandoned, to be replaced by an interim advisory political council, with up to thirty members hand-picked by US forces. This move, coming at a time when the US military forces in Iraq are beginning to realise the extent of their predicament, is likely even further to alienate Iraqi opinion against America and its British allies.

Some elements of the US military predicted these developments several months ago. In February 2003, the US army chief of staff, General Eric Shinseki, said [4] that it could take hundreds of thousands of troops to make Iraq secure after a war. This view was roundly criticised by defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his deputy, Paul Wolfowitz [5]. The civilian leadership at the Pentagon believed that an initial force of around 100,000 would be adequate and could, moreover, be scaled down rapidly in the wake of victory. Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of the war, US department of defense sources suggested that there might be fewer than 70,000 US troops in Iraq within five months.

The American predicament

The current situation and the near-time prognosis form a stark commentary on such projections. Now, seven weeks after the end of the war, there are about 160,000 US and British troops in Iraq; they are supported by around 40,000 other troops in neighbouring countries, especially Kuwait – some 200,000 personnel in all. Such is the state of disarray in Iraq itself that the commander of US ground forces in the country, Lieutenant-General David McKiernan [6], conceded last week that the war had not ended, a point reinforced by frequent attacks on US troops in Baghdad and elsewhere.

What is now happening is that many of the forces that fought the war and were expecting to be replaced by new army units are being kept on in Iraq, even if some of them have been in the Middle East for nine months. Instead of replacing them, the new units will reinforce them, leading to the maintenance of up to 200,000 troops for the foreseeable future.

The main problem for US troops lies with often violent opposition to their presence in some parts of Baghdad and in extensive areas to the north and west of the city. It is likely that a substantial part of the 3rd Infantry Division [7] will have to be deployed to Fallujah, to the west of Baghdad. This could involve up to 10,000 troops and support elements in one of Iraq’s smaller cities, albeit one that has seen seventeen Iraqis killed and scores injured in recent clashes with US troops.

Another US division, the 4th Infantry [8], is currently in place to try and maintain security in a large area of Iraq between Baghdad and the Kurdish north. This includes Tikrit where support for the old regime is still evident, and the 4th Infantry is now to be reinforced with troops from other units, with a brigade of several thousand more troops to be held in reserve in Baghdad.

What this all adds up to is a very substantial security problem that adds a military dimension to all of the many problems facing the US occupying force. Indeed, the very use of the term “occupying power” is now in common usage in western political circles, including those in Britain

and even the United States. This is a far cry from a belief that a victory would be a matter of liberation, with troops welcomed with open arms across the country.

It would be an exaggeration to portray this as equivalent to the United States getting bogged down in a Vietnam-type morass; but neither is it accurate to downplay the US predicament. The problem – and the opportunity – for Washington is that it could extricate itself with ease if it was properly to internationalise the transition of [Iraq](#) [9] to an independent democratic state, by permitting a multinational stabilisation force to help it and encouraging progress towards a new form of governance under UN control.

Why, then, does the Bush administration not take this route? The reason, once more, takes us to the heart of the motive for war. As Paul Wolfowitz benignly pointed out in an already renowned interview with *Vanity Fair* [10] magazine, the focus on disarming Iraq of its weapons of mass destruction as the reason for war was a bureaucratic necessity to ensure a coalition of at least two or three states.

It is also clear that one of the central purposes of the war would be to reduce the US's military presence in Saudi Arabia. Although [Paul Wolfowitz](#) [11] did not follow through the oil connection in his recent spate of interviews, it is necessary to recall that, by occupying Iraq, the United States now controls one eighth of the world's oil reserves, five times as much as three months ago.

That alone is the key reason why Washington will insist on a client regime in Baghdad rather than true political independence for the country, even if that entails a much more intensive military occupation of [Iraq](#) [12] than was expected before the war of March-April 2003. The regional consequences of this strategic choice are likely to be with us for many years.

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