



August 2010 - The end of the war in Iraq?

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The withdrawal of the last US combat troops from Iraq does not mean that Iraq has become a free and independent state, writes Simon Hardy

The withdrawal of US combat troops from Iraq is being presented as the end of an era. Simon Hardy reviews the recent history of Iraq and questions whether the peace can last

August 19th marked the day when the last US combat brigade was pulled out of Iraq two weeks ahead of schedule. Soldiers from 4th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, now known as the 'last patrol', drove out of Baghdad to the Kuwaiti border, under escort from F16 fighter planes and units from the Iraqi army. 'We're the winners in Iraq' Sergeant Robert Hord said to the media. 'I think we have accomplished every goal we've set. We are the winners.'

In fact, as Robert Fisk correctly commented in the London Independent; 'We should not be taken in by the tomfoolery on the Kuwaiti border', the departure of the last "combat" troops from Iraq two weeks ahead of schedule. They are leaving behind 50,000 men and women - a third of the entire US occupation force - who will be attacked and who will still have to fight against the insurgency.'

Indeed, even the 'last 4,000' are being replaced by 7,000 more 'contractors', bringing the total to some 100,000 - the war of occupation is quite simply being privatised so that US combat forces can move on to another pseudo-victory in Afghanistan.

If US claims to be the winners are bogus it is clear enough who the losers are - millions of ordinary Iraqis - the people the US claimed to be rescuing. Taking into account the UN backed sanctions in the 1990s and the victims of the invasion in 2003 and the subsequent war of occupation, over 1.5 million Iraqis have been killed. The standard of living in the country collapsed after 2003, and its cities have been left in ruins by the occupation. An estimated 2.2 million Iraqis have been driven from their homes and become internal refugees. Hundreds of thousands fled to Syria, similar numbers to Jordan, and up to 50,000 to Lebanon. The United Nations refugee council website estimates there may be as many 1.8 million Iraqi refugees in other Middle Eastern countries.

In reality, then, US combat troops leave behind a country where virtually none of their declared objectives have been met, apart from the seizure of the country's oil wealth. Six months after an election there is still no government and inter-sectarian terror attacks are mounting inexorably. A total of 396 civilians were killed by bomb blasts or other attacks in July, after 204 died in June and 275 in May.

The permanent US military presence in Iraq

Combat troops may have been withdrawn but now an elaborate and extensive network of US military bases criss-crosses Iraq. Each one houses thousands of US soldiers, combat equipment, aircraft and tanks, as well as the home away from home luxuries of Pizza Huts and Burger Kings for the soldiers. New military bases were still being built in early August, one, near the town of Zurbatiya, only 7 kilometres from the Iranian border, is part of a new border control system. This new base, codenamed 'Combat Outpost Shocker' will act as the forward listening post and barrack soldiers who will be within striking distance of Iran should the US government decide to escalate hostilities towards Tehran.

The US military base network dominates the Iraqi post occupation military in Iraq. Its largest component is Victory Base Complex, a network of camps protected by anti missile and mortar defence guns and high tech security equipment. Victory Base surrounds Iraq International airport, offering a permanent home for US military personnel and a commanding presence next to the capital. At the centre of Camp Victory is a \$30 million administration building which houses many high command officers and personnel.

By its 'deadline' of the end of August, the US will have spent \$2.4 billion on 'enduring bases'. Despite the 'framework agreement' which envisaged all US troops leaving Iraq by 2011, it now seems clear that the US will attempt to maintain a long term military presence in the country. Many believe that the Iraqi government will find a reason in the coming months to 'invite' the troops to stay on for another five years, thus legitimising the US military's continued presence in the country.

So why is the US so intent on establishing a long term military presence in Iraq? The US ruling class is in fact trying to hold on to the remnants of a political project that started in the mid 1990s and has been continued into the Obama administration.

Iraq ? the jewel in the crown

It would be wrong to imagine that the US plans to invade only date from 2002, or even 2001. A neo-conservative faction within the US ruling class, organised in a think tank called the Project for a New American Century (PNAC) had been formulating plans to occupy Iraq since the mid 1990s. The need for a friendly regime in Iraq was focussed on the question of securing US strategic geo-political interests, primarily energy supplies. The creation, by one means or another, of liberal democratic governments was seen as a useful propaganda tool to mask US imperialist interests. The test of such 'liberal' credentials would be, of course, that they opened their countries up to US corporate interests in the name of investment and development.

The PNAC was not the only organisation calling for an invasion of Iraq or for regime change. Democratic Party President Clinton signed into law the Iraqi Liberation Act which promised money and resources for opposition groups in Iraq and abroad. The PNAC group, although strong advocates of this, always argued that it had to go further. Direct military action would be required to overthrow Saddam Hussein and bring in a pro-western, specifically pro-US government.

George W Bush's election team in 1999 was packed with PNAC people such as Dick Cheney, who became Vice President, Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz. Two other PNAC supporters stood as Republican Presidential candidates in the primaries in 1999 ? clearly PNAC was intent on securing the most powerful job in the world. Once in the White House, they started laying plans for an attack on Iraq. Ex-Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill claimed that the very first National Security Council meeting, eight days after Bush Junior's inauguration, had Iraq as the first topic on its agenda. However, the general feeling was that something would be needed to justify an invasion, since it would not be plausible just to invade Iraq without at least a pretext. The Al-Qaeda attack on the World Trade Centre, 9/11, provided the Pro-Iraq invasion wing of the US ruling class at least with the political context in which to press home their strategy.

The Iraq war

It is worth remembering the mood in 2003 during the build up to the Iraq war. The Afghan conflict was still ongoing, but it was clear in the public mind from early 2002 that the US was intending to invade Iraq. In the US, the government manufactured consent with a massive PR campaign which focussed on trying to conflate the 9/11 attacks with some sort of threat coming out of Iraq. By 2003, many American citizens were so confused by the media onslaught that they thought that Saddam Hussein had been involved in the 9/11 attacks.

In Britain, the Blair government tried several angles, eventually settling on the Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) which Saddam Hussein was supposed to either have or be developing. This was maintained despite various revelations

such as the infamous 'dodgy dossier' on Iraq's WMD capabilities which was taken from a student's published thesis and passed off as intelligence. Other inconsistencies crept up from both the US and UK side, with faulty intelligence from dubious sources being passed around as if it were legitimate.

By the time the war came, it was clear to millions of people that this was a war of conquest by US imperialism, supported only by its allies, first and foremost in London, which they called the 'coalition of the willing'. The name is important because it points to the fact that neither Nato nor the UN endorsed the military action, forcing the Bush administration to create an international alliance with no 'legal' basis to carry out the action.

Shock and awe

The fighting in Iraq was relatively short. Iraqi soldiers and irregular militiamen fought with out of date weaponry against the state of the art US army. Iraq itself was subjected to the military strategy of 'shock and awe', supposedly a new development in military thought, this is simply the modern application of Hitler's Blitzkrieg. It focuses especially on massive bombardment before troops are even committed to battle, focussing on major cities and towns of an enemy country.

Its aim is explicit 'to terrify the enemy population and government to the point of total surrender. It must 'cause ... the threat and fear of action that may shut down all or part of the adversary's society or render his ability to fight useless, short of complete physical destruction.' This paralysing fear should be caused by destroying 'means of communication, transportation, food production, water supply, and other aspects of infrastructure'. Its authors are at least honest when they go on to say that the level of destruction must be similar to that in Hiroshima and Nagasaki after the US nuclear attack in August 1945.

Such a policy operates in the grey area of the Geneva Convention which prohibits directly targeting civilians in war. The US commanders claimed that they were not specifically targeting civilians, though some 'collateral damage' is inevitable if you bomb a city of 5 million people with guided missiles and bombs. The brutal face of the war on terror was revealed 'the sheer might of US imperialism fighting to stamp its dominance on the world.

The contempt and cynicism of the invasion is perhaps best illustrated by the refusal of the US to count the number of Iraq civilian dead. In clear breach of international law, which requires an occupying force to keep accurate records of civilian deaths, US General Tommy Franks stated at a press conference at Bagram Air Force base that "we don't do body counts."

The task of counting the dead from the invasion and occupation fell to Non Governmental Organisations. During the invasion phase, around 7,500 Iraqi civilians were killed and another 24,000 within the first two years of the occupation according to Iraqi Body Count, based in Oxford. Iraqi Body Count has very strict criteria, namely, figures given in at least two newspaper reports, which can dramatically underestimate the number of dead. The Lancet, the principal British medical journal, claimed in October 2004 that 98,000 had died from both direct violence and indirectly from lack of food or medicine, caused by the facts of the occupation. By October 2006, they claimed that 694,965 had died

Failed state building

By 2003, Iraq was already war torn, shattered after a generation of indescribable suffering at the hands of the UN backed economic sanctions programme. In April of that year, Paul Wolfowitz claimed, "There has got to be an effective administration from day one? People need water and food and medicine, and the sewers have to work, the electricity has to work. And that's a coalition responsibility." What the Iraqi people got and what they needed, however, were two very different things.

The problem was compounded by the fact that the US not only wanted to create a state in Iraq that would be amenable to the Washington consensus of neo-liberalism but to create that state using neo-liberal methods. After the seizure of Baghdad, the Paul Bremer administration moved in. Assuming the role of a Roman proconsul, Bremer and his advisers from the US top corporations, made sure that post Saddam Iraq was built to American specifications. His Coalition

Provisional Authority (CPA) was safely housed in a huge fortified military base in the middle of Baghdad, called the Green Zone, and acted as a sovereign power, which it was not, passing laws and signing edicts in breach of international law.

This meant signing over much of the economy to 'privateers', mainly US companies who were given lucrative multi-million dollar contracts to run almost everything, from the seaports to the airports, from the cement plants to the oil refineries. Privatisation was hard wired into the subsequent Iraqi constitution, making it illegal for any subsequent government to nationalise anything. Order 39, issued by Bremer in September 2003, allowed not only for 100% privatisation of all state owned enterprises but also for all of the profits to be taken out of the country. By Order 49, corporate tax was cut from 40 per cent to 15 per cent. No wonder the Economist called it a 'capitalist dream'.

Nor did they actually do the job. The U.S. devastated Iraq's power plants and electricity grid in their First Gulf War, then got the UN to impose sanctions that prevented most of them from being rebuilt. Power generation dropped to a third of pre-war levels. US corporations were then allowed to rake in billions of dollars for rebuilding the power grid. General Electric alone pocketed \$3 billion. Yet, today, residents in Basra or Baghdad only get a few hours of electricity a day, while summer temperatures reach 50°C. Before the 1991 Gulf War, Iraq generated 9,300 megawatts of electricity. Today, after seven years of "reconstruction", production is only 6,000 megawatts.

Not only was money spent on reconstruction politically motivated in the interests of US business, but its expenditure was largely unaccounted for. The CPA under Bremer was given \$12bn in cash by the US treasury and then spent the money without proper accounting - hardly any receipts were kept and the staff employed by Bremer were often totally inexperienced in financial matters.

As the entire post Saddam economy was being modelled on neoliberal principles, much of the work was sub-contracted out to companies like Halliburton (one of whose former chiefs, Dick Cheney, was the Vice President of the US at the time). Halliburton themselves would sub-contract out to other people to carry out jobs or procure materials such as trucks. A lucrative profiteering racket was set up as middle men skimmed money from the cash in hand payments and ripped off various local businesses.

Even by 2009, the US Department of Defense could not account for 96% of its allocated money. Out of \$9bn (£5.8bn), \$8.7bn is not properly accounted for - although the Department of Defense made clear that the money was not 'lost', its expenditure was just not properly recorded.

This corruption, nepotism and political prioritisation of profit making had a terrible affect on the Iraqi school and hospital systems. Iraq used to boast one of the most educated populations in the Middle East. By 2006, the school and university system was so under funded and systematically targeted by sectarian attacks that it was 'on the brink of collapse'. In 2010, a massive public relations exercise got under way when Jill Biden, vice president Joe Biden's wife, visited Iraqi schools and universities to parade how much money was being spent on the schools. The U.S. Agency for International Development published a report of how many maths books they had distributed in Iraq, as well as the improved wages of the teaching staff. One parent's reactions sum up the reality. "I wish every single word of it were true - but it isn't."

Now, in Iraq, major investment is still needed in roads, infrastructure and communications, as well as the public sector institutions that people in the west take for granted. Why is there such a lack of investment in a country with the world's second biggest oil reserves? Simply put, most of the profits are still getting sucked out of the country to the west. In early 2010, the Iraqi government issued new contracts to develop massive new oil fields, working with companies like Royal Dutch Shell, Exxon Mobil and Occidental Petroleum Corp. Increasingly, oil contracts are also going out to the Chinese state oil company and Petroliam Nasional Berhad from Malaysia.

Workers under the occupation

Trade unionists suffered cruelly under the regime of Saddam Hussein. In 1987, he issued the infamous Public Law 150,

banning unions in public enterprises, from oil and power plants to factories, schools and hospitals. Any workers who believed the US invasion would bring an era of democracy to Iraq soon found that this did not apply to them. On 23 April 2003, when one of the future leaders of the Basra oil workers went out to meet US troops, he was ordered to lie flat on his face and a soldier put his foot on his back. These men plainly regarded themselves not as liberators but as conquerors. Any democratic concessions that workers did get were solely the product of their own courage and, above all, their willingness to strike and demonstrate to enforce their right to organise.

In September 2003, Paul Bremer, as head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, announced he would keep in force Saddam's Public Law 150. The reasons were soon clear enough. The Americans and their allies intended to plunder the state-owned industries and services of the country. Independent working class organisations and workers' demands would be an obstacle to this. Bremer slashed basic wages from \$60 to \$40 a month, ended subsidies for food and housing, permitted the sell-off of Iraq's state enterprises (with the exception of the oil industry) to foreign companies with the privateers allowed total repatriation of their profits.

Despite their continued illegality, Iraq's unions were the most active critics of the privatisation of the country's wealth. The Basra oil workers were in the forefront of struggles to stop every step in this direction. KBR, a subsidiary of Halliburton, was awarded the contract to put out fires in the huge Rumeila oilfields. It then took over the financial side of Basra's civil administration and workers found themselves under its control. When KBR also claimed control of reconstructing the wells and pipelines, workers rose in revolt at this creeping privatisation.

Hassan Juma'a, president of the Federation of Oil Employees in Iraq, stated: "It is our duty to protect the oil installations, since they are the property of the Iraqi people." The new union gave KBR a deadline to leave the oil district and, when it expired, shut down production. "For two days we refused to pump a single drop until they left," said another union leader, Farouk Sadiq. "Other workers in Basra refused to work, too. It was independence day for oil labor."

That began a wave of union recruitment in the south. A new union in the ports of Um Qasr and Zubair forced two huge corporations, the Danish Maersk and Seattle-based Stevedoring Services of America, to surrender concessions they'd been given to operate Iraq's deepwater shipping facilities. In late 2003, the oil union threatened to strike again if Bremer ordered lower wages. The oil minister caved in, bringing the basic wage up to \$85 per month.

The unionisation that started in the south spread across Iraq. Strikes took place in Baghdad and other cities. A variety of rival union federations emerged. Unions organised by members of the Communist Party merged with Ba'athist unions to form the General Federation of Iraqi Workers. Others formed the General Federation of Workers' Councils and Unions of Iraq, later joined by the oil workers. Teachers and journalists also reorganised their old unions and these remained independent.

After the January 2005 elections, politicians promised that the new constitution would include a reform of Iraq's anti-union laws. Instead, the government not only refused to repeal Law 150, but passed a succession of new restrictive laws. In 2005, Decree 870 gave the state the power to take over unions and prohibit them from collecting dues. But the unions fought on. By 2007, the US was demanding that they and their allies' multinationals should have access to the country's oil reserves on the most favourable terms. On June 4, in protest, the Federation of Oil Employees in Iraq shut down the pipelines from the Rumeila fields near Basra, to the Baghdad refinery and the rest of the country. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki called out the army and surrounded the strikers.

2010 has witnessed wave after wave of government assaults on the unions. In January, the Maliki administration tried to seize control of the independent Iraqi Teachers' Union from its elected leadership. The union's president in Basra was thrown in jail and the government ran a slate that teachers easily recognised as a front for Maliki's party.

In January, pressure on unions in the oil districts escalated. Overtime hours were cut, reducing income even further and militant workers were demoted. Hassan Juma'a, president of the Federation of Oil Employees in Iraq, criticised refinery managers for cutting the food rations workers receive as a supplement to their low salaries. His statement was followed

a few days later by a protest by workers in the refinery itself. Union leaders have been transferred to worksites hundreds of miles from home, others have had warrants issued for their arrest, and the government has blocked the union's representatives from leaving the country to seek support from other unionists abroad.

In March, workers organised demonstrations throughout the oil district, demanding pay increases, permanent positions for temporary workers, modernisation of the equipment and facilities, and legal status for their union. In April, fears of retaliation were realised. Five union leaders were transferred from the Basra refinery to Baghdad, hundreds of miles away. South Refineries Company spokesman Qassem Ramadhan admitted that the transfers were punishment for earlier worker protests.

In June, repression spread to the ports. Leaders of the dock workers' union were transferred 1,000 kilometres from their worksites, and when workers protested, management brought in military units who surrounded the demonstrators. Finally, as electricity workers filled the streets of Basra, the Southern Oil Company issued arrest warrants for Hassan Juma'a and Faleh Abood Umara, the oil union's general secretary, who was held for two days.

On 21 July police stormed the offices of the Iraqi Electrical Utility Workers' Union in Basra on the orders of Electricity Minister Hussain al-Shahristani. All union activity in the plants operated by the ministry, was banned, union offices closed, all their assets seized.

Finally, in August, the parliamentary committee considering the new draft labour law supposed to include union rights simply discarded it, returning the long drawn out reform process to zero and leaving Law 150 and the bans on activity as the only laws in force.

The retreat of the resistance

Shortly after the official end of the war in Iraq, in May 2003, a resistance movement began amongst Iraqis determined to drive the imperialists out of their country. They were a mixture of Islamists, nationalists and Ba'athist supporters of the former regime, who were well armed and widely supported by the Iraqi people. The resistance fighters were immediately labelled as terrorists, insurgents, or Islamic fundamentalists from Al-Qaeda. The reality is that the movement developed into a mass force numbering hundreds of thousands of fighters, with widespread popular support.

The resistance captured whole towns, such as Fallujah and Mosul, and this led to the first major engagement of the conflict in April 2004 when thousands of US soldiers besieged and assaulted Fallujah. The US and occupation forces responded with shock and awe attacks that destroyed many homes and killed thousands of people. Footage was shown on international media of US soldiers killing wounded Iraqi fighters.

The 'Coalition of the Willing' was willing to operate something close to a scorched earth policy in order to beat the resistance. In the infamous words of a US general in the Vietnam War 'we had to destroy the village in order to save it': but now it was a question of an entire city. However, it was clear by 2005, that force alone would not be enough. The cynically named 'battle for hearts and minds', began i.e. bribing and coercing sections of the opposition to come over to the side of the occupiers.

The preferred, US-backed, political party was the Iraqi National Congress, an organisation with a name clearly designed to invoke memories of the ruling party in post British Empire India. The INC was heavily funded by the CIA throughout the 1990s and was regarded by the US as the umbrella group of the anti-Saddam forces. It was the organisation which provided much of the intelligence to the CIA in the run up to the 2003 invasion, including bogus information on WMDs and Iraqi military operations. It was led by Ahmed Chalabi, an Iraqi exile who was groomed by the US to be the post invasion president, or at least to play a major role in the government. Sadly for its CIA paymasters, the INC turned out to be a Potemkin village. Its support in Iraq was small and, despite being an important component of the post invasion government that was set up, when the dust cleared after the invasion, the INC was clearly deeply unpopular. Chalabi was made minister of oil and then deputy prime minister in the interim government but then the INC's star fell quickly - it won no seats in the 2005 elections. The US had to look to other potential

stooges for their political power games.

In the tradition of other imperialist occupation powers before them, the US turned to a strategy of divide and rule. Initially, they established a Shi'a dominated government and police force, fearing that the Sunnis, who had formed the support base for Saddam Hussein's regime before 2003, were too hostile to the occupation. They relied in the early days of post invasion Iraq on parties like the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, a party with close ties to Iran and the Al-Dawa party, both organisations with strong militias and ties to other Islamic groups or regimes abroad.

Then the Shi'a parties began to assert themselves, establishing their own militias, like Muqtada Al-Sadr's Mahdi Army, which controlled the south of Baghdad for several years. The US then tried to build bridges with the Sunnis, succeeding in 2005 by establishing the Awakening Councils in western Iraq, whom they brought onto the US payroll ? offering each fighter \$300 a week to fight Al-Qaeda.

What greatly helped the US and UK occupation was the beginnings of the sectarian violence in March 2004 when a co-ordinated suicide bomber attack massacred almost 200 Shia pilgrims during the Ashura festival. The sectarian violence escalated until 2006-07, when the country was classified as being in a state of civil war. By May 2006, Iraq was in the top five failed states, according to US Foreign Policy Journal.

After toppling the government, disbanding the army, playing one side off against the other politically and recruiting security forces that became riddled with hard-line sectarian elements, the US authorities then used the resulting violence as the main reason for the continuation of the US military presence in the country. As the anti-war movement pointed out at the time, none of this violence would have been occurring if the occupation had not happened.

Despite the public relations work by the western media, showing soldiers playing with young Iraq children and smiling as they patrolled bullet riddled streets, it was apparent that most Iraqis wanted the soldiers gone. No wonder, when the mentality of the occupation soldiers, not just at Abu Ghraib, but generally, is examined. As one brigade commander Jeffrey Huggins explained to soldiers newly arriving in Iraq, "Be nice" but have a plan to kill every single person you meet." Truly the words of an imperialist occupier.

Alongside the US and British armies, Iraq was flooded with "contractors". Although this may sound like people working on building sites, most were private security guards, run by now infamous outfits like Blackwater. Subcontracted security firms, made up largely of ex-military personnel and police, acted like cowboys in the wild west. They were involved in various incidents in which many Iraqi civilians were killed. When the people of Fallujah caught four of these mercenaries, they killed them and dragged their bodies through the streets before hanging them from lampposts in the town centre. What was shown in the media as an act of bloody barbarism was the response to the aggressive and violent nature of these security contractors ? people who should not have been in Iraq in the first place. Currently, there are still 95,000 security contractors in Iraq, almost twice as many as the US garrison, working at everything from diplomatic bodyguards to hired guns for corporations.

The scale of complicity by the Iraqi government and US in the activities of the mercenaries operating there was breathtaking. At one point, the mercenaries were even guaranteed immunity from prosecution under Iraqi law, giving the trigger happy, privatised security services carte blanche to kill without suffering the consequences under international law.

By 2006-07, the resistance movement was beginning to splinter and was clearly being held back by serious acts of sectarian violence. The circumstances surrounding the beginnings of the sectarian violence were very suspicious. A number of journalists reported strange incidents and rumours began to circulate that the bombings were not all they seemed. Perhaps no incident really captures the sense of confusion better than the incident in Basra in 2005 when two British special forces soldiers in plainclothes who shot at Iraqi police were arrested and taken to Basra central jail.

It subsequently emerged that the Iraqi police officers involved had claimed that the British soldiers' car had been filled with explosives and guns. So concerned were the British to get their men out of prison that they launched a jail break

and demolished a part of the prison with tanks to get them out. What were the special forces doing in plainclothes? Why did they shoot at the police? Why couldn't the British just ask for their men to be released? Why did they have to demolish a prison to break them out within hours of their capture? Perhaps the answers to these questions will never be known, but certainly not everything was what it seemed.

The sectarian violence escalated peaked in 2007, when Iraq looked like it was in a state of civil war. This was immensely useful for the occupation forces. It allowed them to rebrand the occupation as a peacekeeping operation. They now justified themselves with the same arguments that the British used in Northern Ireland, if they did not have soldiers there then the sectarian violence would leave many more people dead.

Throughout this phase, however, a significant number of Iraqis were killed by the occupation forces, and the cause of the violence was ultimately still the occupation itself. Without self determination and the removal of interference from the imperialist powers, it was impossible for a single, hegemonic, and genuinely Iraqi government to emerge from the chaos and impose order. Without a strong organised working class, armed and led by a revolutionary party, there was no socialist alternative to the sectarianism or the increasing reliance on the imperialist troops by ordinary Iraqis who were, by this time, just desperate for some peace.

Nor was the shifting balance of forces in Iraq solely a product of internal developments. Ironically, given Washington's long term objective of regime change in Teheran, Iran has played a central role in Iraqi politics ever since the invasion. Because the majority of Iraqis are, like the majority of Iranians, Shia Muslims, there has always been a potential for Teheran to intervene via Shi'ite forces on the ground. The most visible of these was Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army. Although this was targeted several times by occupation forces and their Iraqi allies, trying to dislodge them from various areas they controlled, there was never an outright confrontation and, after Moqtada al-Sadr's lengthy visit to Iran in 2007-8, open conflict subsided altogether.

To an important degree the success in provoking sectarian divisions in Iraq did create a breathing space for the occupation forces, allowing them to pull their troops out in an orderly manner whilst continuing to build their permanent bases and maintaining their people in the government. They avoided a 'retreat from Saigon' moment - the humiliation of US embassy staff being airlifted out of Baghdad as the city fell to the resistance would have left a permanent scar on the psyche of the USA for generations to come.

Instability will worsen

As the 4th Stryker brigade crossed the Kuwaiti border, they were leaving a country still suffering serious power cuts every day and where one in four people are still without access to safe drinking water. The Shia, Sunni and nationalist factions seemingly cannot agree on who should be Prime Minister - but the real problem is that seven years of 'regime building' in Iraq have not produced a stable nation state, there are still too many competing ethnic and religious groups. Two generals of US-backed Sunni militias reported in early August that many of their fighters were defecting to Al-Qaeda in the run up to the US combat withdrawal. This confirms that the 'stabilisation' was based on massive bribery and corruption.

More worryingly, for the US, is the unknown factor of how many Iraqi soldiers and police are secretly resistance members or supporters. After the 'overwhelming surge' in the cities and towns by thousands of US soldiers, many resistance fighters simply put their guns away and played a waiting game - biding their time before they could begin the struggle again. The Sunni militias are only partially loyal to the current regime in Baghdad. Any serious shake up of political forces or a realignment of political interests could see the militias turn on the government and try to seize power themselves. Or there could be a balkanisation of Iraq with the Kurdish autonomous region in the north splitting off and the Sunni areas demanding greater autonomy. At worst, Iraq could descend into a civil war, with the government requesting more US soldiers to 'keep the peace'.

Iraq became synonymous both with US imperialist hubris and the fundamental flaws in its strategy of regime building. It is relatively easy to knock over a third world dictator, but building a new, pro-imperialist, regime on the rubble is

next to impossible. The impending admission of failure in Afghanistan will only prove the point further.

Tragically, for the Iraqis, a powerful and democratic anti-imperialist force has not emerged. Indeed, only one based on the working class but based on a break from the discredited Iraqi Communist Party, could have done this. Religious bigotry and sectarian strife were a rarity in a highly secular Iraq before Saddam's paranoid persecution of the Shia after the First Gulf War in 1991. The US occupiers then poured fuel on the flames with their policy of divide and rule.

What is needed today in Iraq is a strong political working class movement, linked to the militant trade unions but also drawing in the unemployed, women and youth. The Iraqi working class needs a party to fight for its interests, to challenge the sectarianism, to develop a clear anti-imperialist strategy and prepare the working class for a revolutionary seizure of power.

Such a programme would focus on the immediate needs of the poor and workers, targeting the oil industry for strikes and occupations, demanding renationalisation under workers' control of all privatised assets, reinvestment of the oil profits back into the economy. A campaign against the US bases and for the expulsion of all foreign mercenaries would also draw in wider layers of people concerned about the sovereignty of Iraq, drawing them closer to the workers' movement as the revolutionary alternative. This is essential to develop a socialist strategy for Iraq and to put the working class and urban poor into power. Otherwise, the power vacuum will be filled by Islamists or nationalists.

The Iraq war was also a defining political moment for a generation across the world. The huge anti-war movement showed that international solidarity was both possible and real in the face of such an overt imperialist action. The bravery of the resistance in Iraq, coupled with the huge anti-war campaigns across the world, made further imperialist adventures almost impossible for the US and Britain. Now, if they threaten Iran or interventions in Yemen or Somalia, we must be ready once again to take action.

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