Iraq: The Case for Immediate U.S. Withdrawal

written by Joanne Landy | January 10, 2010

IT'S HARD TO SEE HOW the Bush administration is going to win the war in Iraq. Despite all the official bravado, a cloud of doom is descending on the White House, and with good reason: international outrage is mounting at U.S. behavior at Abu Ghraib prison and throughout Iraq, more and more Americans are concluding that the war is going badly, and Iraq is proving uncontrollable with reports, in May, that only 35 percent of Iraqis want U.S. forces to stay.("The State of Iraq: an Update" by Adriana Lins de Albuquerque, Michael O'Hanlon and Amy Unikewicz, *New York Times*, May 16, 2004.)

Shamelessly, after so much vilification and ridicule of the United Nations, the administration is now hoping that the appearance of UN control can rescue its war. Yet, as the New York Times pointed out in describing the selection of the interim Iraqi government, UN control is illusory: ". . . it has become clear that the United Nations special envoy, Lakhdar Brahimi, played a secondary role in setting up the new government. People close to the envoy say the choices, especially that of the prime minister, Iyad Allawi, were essentially negotiated between the United States and the Iraqi Governing Council, which the occupation authorities put together last year." ("Iraq's New Government Faces Bargaining Over Its Power" by Steven R. Weisman, posted on *The New York Times* website June 2, 2004.)

Will Congress continue to serve as a handmaiden to the war effort, and will the American people permit this war to continue? So far, Congress is going along with the administration; as we go to press it is in the process of disgracefully acquiescing in Bush's request for $25 billion more for the war. At the same time, however, popular support is falling precipitously. A *Newsweek* poll reported in early May that approval of Bush's handling of Iraq has dipped to 35 percent, compared with 44 percent in April. Some 57 percent of respondents said they disapprove.

This is a critical time. While the majority of Americans are not likely in the next few weeks to favor the complete withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq, people are starting to consider the option seriously. But to turn this questioning trend into massive popular opposition to administration policy, we in the peace movement have to make the case against keeping U.S. forces in Iraq. The American public certainly hasn't heard any talk of withdrawal from John Kerry, who has spoken essentially about ways to salvage the operation: send 40,000 more troops and "internationalize" the situation while leaving U.S. forces in control. Kerry in effect advocates reconstituting the coalition that conducted the 1991 Gulf War with the imprimatur of the Security Council, which gave the U.S. war crucial cover. *New York Times* columnist Tom Friedman, as usual, has put the argument succinctly and baldly: "The deeper we try to penetrate Iraqi society, especially with tanks and troops, the more legitimacy we need." (April 11, 2004)

Notably, Bush himself is reluctantly coming to adopt something akin to Kerry's view of the need for UN cover. Today, Kerry is willing to grant more concessions than Bush on giving marginally greater say to the UN and the other great powers, and on sharing the bounty of reconstruction contracts with other powerful countries — but as the United States' stark position becomes more untenable, Bush may well be willing to make similar concessions in order to preserve the essence of U.S. control.

The war against Iraq was wrong, first and foremost because it constituted an expansion of U.S. imperial power, but also because of the economic, political and military straitjacket it would predictably impose on the Iraqi people. If the Iraqis themselves had overthrown Saddam Hussein, they might have created opportunities for building a truly democratic state responsive to the needs of the population — though of course there is no guarantee that this would have been the outcome of an internal revolt against the Baathists. The Bush administration's action, however, replaced Saddam Hussein's dictatorship with a governing council wholly accountable to the United States, with members to be added, replaced or fired at will, and designed to carry out U.S. policies on all essential matters.

Meanwhile, the United States intended all along to keep tens of thousands of troops in Iraq long past any formal handover of "sovereignty" in order to insure the perpetuation of its domination of Iraq and strengthen its military presence in the region. The kind of democracy the administration anticipated for Iraq was at best a government managed by compliant pro-U.S. politicians, with formal elections but little or no effective challenge from grassroots unions, independent human rights and social justice organizations, or democratic left-wing political parties. Now it is questionable whether even such a show democracy will actually be allowed, though it is still possible.

The Bush administration's repugnant plan for empire is proving to be a spectacular failure. It would appear that many Iraqis were initially ambivalent about the U.S. occupation, resenting foreign domination while also hoping, mostly out of desperation, that the United States might bring a measure of law and order and some democratic freedoms. Over time the occupation has become increasingly unpopular and now more and more of even the previously uncertain are turning against it. At the same time, throughout the Middle East and the Muslim world generally, popular hatred of the United States, along with a craving for revenge, is growing exponentially. As the United States becomes known as more brutal, torturing prisoners and lashing out not only against the insurgents but also against thousands of Iraqi noncombatants, the most authoritarian and theocratic elements in Iraqi society are strengthened because they seem to be the only ones willing and able to confront the United States. A May poll in Iraq indicating that Moqtada al-Sadr's popularity has surged reveals how the United States has increased the attraction of repressive fundamentalists. ("Iraqi poll shows big jump in support for rebel cleric Sadr," by Roula Khalaf, *Financial Times,* May 20, 2004.) An example of the power fundamentalists have gained under the occupation is the University of Basra, where the *Financial Times* reports that if a female student "wants to attend her classes, she is forced to cover her head with a hijab or risk the wrath of Shia extremists, backed by armed militias, who are intimidating students across the campus." ("Female students taught harsh lessons," by Lina Saigol, *Financial Times*, May 13, 2004.)

The campaign to win the American public over to a policy of immediate withdrawal is critical because while a U.S. victory in Iraq seems highly unlikely under either Bush or Kerry, the war can be drawn out for months or even years, with the attendant deaths of tens of thousands of Iraqis and thousands of Americans. Those of us who advocate immediate and total withdrawal of U.S. troops are told that doing so will jeopardize Iraqi freedom, but in fact the dynamic is exactly the opposite. The only way the people of the United States can act to end this symbiotic syndrome in Iraq — in which retrograde elements in Iraq feed off of the brutality of the U.S. occupation, while the occupation legitimizes itself by pointing to these retrograde elements — the only way we can enhance the possibility, however remote, of secularism and democracy in that country, is to force the U.S. government to withdraw its troops.

Beyond that, the United States could help prevent a repeat of the awful scenario unfolding in Iraq today by undertaking a new, economically egalitarian, and democratic foreign policy — a keystone of which would be an end to the United States' one-sided support for Israel and de facto

hostility to the demand of the Palestinians for their own state. Only such a foreign policy would have a real chance of promoting popular resistance to dictators like Saddam Hussein and political Islamic fundamentalists like Osama bin Laden or Moqtada al-Sadr. Of course, changing U.S. foreign policy in such a basic way would require deep changes at home; corporate capitalist America, under either of the two parties, is incapable of pursing a consistently democratic and just foreign policy. We need an independent progressive mass party, free of corporate control and, ultimately, a socialist America. An important step towards this goal is building a movement for a new foreign policy. Such a peace movement could win important specific victories — like forcing a withdrawal from Iraq — while learning from its experience and educating others about the limits of reform in both domestic and foreign policy spheres as long as capitalism holds sway.

The Bush administration and many leading Democratic Party politicians say that the U.S. cannot just "cut and run," that "failure for the United States in Iraq is not an option." The defenders of U.S. empire do indeed have an investment in being "bitter enders," because they understand that the ability of the United States to exert its power globally will be undermined by a defeat in Iraq. The rest of us, however, have no such stake in continuing this nightmare.

Many progressives believe that the United Nations can resolve the Iraqi crisis in a positive way. In general, however, it is highly improbable that the UN can stand up for social justice and true democracy since it is dominated in the Security Council by countries that have a deep interest in preserving the unfair global status quo. Any one of the five permanent United Nations Security Council members — the United States, Britain, France, Russia or China – can veto any initiative, though usually council members defer to the U.S. as the pillar of the established global order. The council departed from this pattern when it refused to give the U.S. a rubber stamp for the second Gulf war, but despite the reservations of many key countries about the brazen way that the U.S. is trying to manipulate the Iraqi government, the UN is extremely unlikely to actually act to prevent the U.S. from completing its construction of 14 permanent military bases in Iraq and keeping its troops in the country. Nor is it likely to challenge the behind-the-scenes U.S. domination of Iraq by the more than 100 American advisers inserted into the country's governing institutions.

An indication of the Security Council's compromised position is that it has done nothing to challenge the neoliberal economic policies imposed by the U.S.-appointed Iraqi Governing Council, such as privatization of the country's economy and a 15 percent ceiling on taxes. Nor did the council utter a word of protest when in July 2003, U.S. troops attacked members of the Union of the Unemployed engaged in peaceful protests against U.S. military and corporations' treatment of the jobless, or when leaders of the Union were arrested in August 2003. Truly free elections in a truly democratic Iraq would likely result in a mandate for withdrawal of all foreign occupying forces, a reversal of Paul Bremer's Chicago-style economics, and an insistence by the Iraqi people that they have a right to control their own resources. Yet the UN looks prepared to give its blessing to a "transition" that will keep thousands of U.S. troops in the country, in a position to exert overwhelming power and influence over the forthcoming elections and Iraqi political life. Moreover Brahimi and the UN have not blocked the United States' backdoor work to preserve its power under the new caretaker government. *The Wall Street Journal* reports:

> As Washington prepares to hand over power, U.S. administrator L. Paul Bremer and other officials are quietly building institutions that will give the U.S. powerful levers for influencing nearly every important decision the interim government will make. In a series of edicts issued earlier this spring, Mr. Bremer's Coalition Provisional Authority created new commissions that effectively take away virtually all of the powers once held by several ministries. ("Behind the Scenes, U.S. Tightens Grip On Iraq's Future" by Yochi J. Dreazen and Christopher Cooper, *Wall Street Journal*, May 13, 2004.)

Given the UN Security Council's current role as accomplice to the U.S. in Iraq it would be naïve to expect it, if it were given greater authority, to suddenly change course and promote a vibrant democracy that could totally expel the United States, even though many of the Security Council's members may well wish to diminish somewhat the extent of U.S. power.

One need not support the Iraqi forces currently leading the fight against the United States to favor immediate and complete withdrawal of U.S. troops. Though accurate facts about the military confrontation are hard to come by, and we certainly have no reason to trust American claims, it is quite possible that the anti-U.S. struggle has been captured, at least for now, by viciously reactionary elements — Baathists and political Islamic fundamentalists, the latter bent on installing a repressive religious order on the country. But whether or not reactionaries have achieved control of the anti-occupation struggle (and we hope that they have not), the realities in Iraq reveal the gap between the fantasy of a benevolent superpower and the actual role that the United States plays in strengthening the opponents of the trade unions, women's groups, secular forces and human rights organizations that are the only hope for a democratic Iraq.

Some former anti-war activists say that however they might have felt about going into Iraq in the first place, the United States can't now just abandon the country, and that the demand for withdrawal of American troops should be postponed until there is some assurance of democracy and security there. Some have retreated from calling for immediate withdrawal to calling for withdrawal "at the earliest possible moment," which leaves room for prolonging the occupation indefinitely since the criteria for "possible" are quite ambiguous. To adopt this approach would be to fall into a trap, to make a terrible mistake analogous to the debilitating call of some in the anti- war movement at the time of the Vietnam War for "negotiations" rather than immediate withdrawal. The peace movement today needs to go to the American people and convince them that, directly contrary to the arguments given by the Bush administration and its supporters in both parties for staying in Iraq, the only hope for beginning to strengthen the struggle for democracy and security in that country lies in bringing the troops home now. Beyond Iraq, successful popular pressure for immediate withdrawal could be the beginning of a movement for a new, democratic and non-imperial U.S. foreign policy that would be in the real interests of both the American people and the people in the rest of the world. What a joy that would be!

Footnotes