



Little Sign of US Policy Changes for Iraq's Mayhem

*Robert Matthews**

As we approach the end of 2006, there is no end in sight for the catastrophically unnecessary war the US has unleashed in Iraq. For the past three years this nation of 28 million people has experienced a headlong descent into a state of chaos. Violence began after the US invasion with Iraqi Sunnis and international jihadists, both with occasional ties to Al Qaeda, targeting the occupation forces and their perceived collaborators. But the fighting is no longer divided neatly among Sunni vs. Shiite groups. The country is now splintered among dozens of tribal and geographic fault lines, pitting neighborhoods or districts against their immediate rivals and against government ministries which compete for recruits for their militias and death squads.

Anthony Cordesman, a military analyst with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a moderate Washington think-tank, in his recent lengthy report on Iraq, identifies twenty-three different militias around Baghdad alone. Ethnic militias compete with each other as well. The Badr Brigades and the Mahdi Army of Moqtada al-Sadr are joined in a fierce and bloody struggle for power inside the Shiite camp. The larger militias are filled with violent, criminal and often rogue factions, complemented by small, allied movements that may act as impromptu death squads. People rarely turn to the police or state security apparatus, whose links to revenge killings and criminal activity render them yet another source of sectarian violence. Paradoxically, the US has predicated its withdrawal on the strengthening of the Iraqi security forces, but like a Chinese finger trap, the more power they acquire, the more violence and killing is produced.

The ensuing violence, unspeakably brutal in Baghdad, has spread from there to surrounding towns -- particularly Baquba, Balad, and Amara -- as civil war threatens to escalate and overwhelm the country. Security conditions have deteriorated to the point where attacks against American and Iraqi targets have surged, since August, to an average of 960 per week. This increase of 22 percent from the incidence of violence between May and August represents the highest level of the war thus far. Cordesman states that even if the current levels of violence in Iraq do not deteriorate further (an assumption increasingly appearing as wishful thinking), 43,800 people will die next year.

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Sectarian violence and fighting between US forces and insurgents have also created an estimated 1.8 million refugees since 2003; Iraqis are leaving the country at an accelerating rate—an estimated 100,000 a month this year. Internal displacement is harder to quantify but since the Samara mosque bombing in February 2006, over 430,000 Sunni and Shiite Iraqis fled neighborhoods in which they were a minority. These depressing statistics and the anemic refugee aid provided by the country mainly responsible—the US—point to an exacerbation of the already dire humanitarian problems in the country.

In addition to the escalating problems inside Iraq, from security to the development of adequate infrastructure to provision of basic services, there is a growing sense that the end of the US occupation, whenever it comes, will be followed by a general unraveling of the Middle East. In the background there is the real threat that Iraq will become the focus of regional rivalries and geopolitical jockeying for power and influence. Saudi Arabia fears the rise of Iran as the region's hegemon and is already showing signs that it will support and finance the Sunni minority's struggle to regain what it has lost to the Iranian-backed Shiite majority, since the US invasion. Iran, holding sway over the Shiite majority and the Shia-dominated Iraqi government, will surely become a major player in Iraq's future. Finally, both Turkey and Iran are casting a wary eye on the emergence of an independent Kurdistan in Northern Iraq.

Congressional elections, won by the opposition Democrats, demonstrated the US public's disenchantment with the war. Polls show 70% of the US public disapprove of president George Bush's handling of the Iraqi occupation and subsequent insurgency-- the highest percentage yet. More than six of ten US citizens believe that the war was "not worth fighting." The war has become the most significant drag on the president's overall approval ratings which hover at their all-time low of 37%. (By comparison, Bill Clinton's approval rating at this point in his second term—even after his impeachment--- was 67%.)

Reinforcing the electoral message, the Iraq Study Group, a bipartisan government advisory panel, released its report this month, describing conditions in Iraq as "grave and deteriorating." The report itself appears to be a manifesto by the conservative realist school that neoconservative romanticism in foreign policy has led to a dangerously deteriorating quagmire in Iraq and that simply staying the course is no longer an adequate policy.

San Francisco lawyer, political activist and commentator, Robert Donovan, however, concludes that the report does not go far nearly enough in recognizing the conclusive nature of the disaster or proposing a sensible formula for a dignified retreat. The realists simply could not shake off the unrealistic assumptions of the last four years of the Bush administration—chief of which has been an article of faith in victory: achieving a viable---if not democratic-- regime. Donovan sums up his doubts as to the report's efficacy like this: "if Bush is insisting that pigs will soon fly, the 'realists' are saying that, with the right approach, penguins will migrate to Miami and vote Republican. [This is] more likely than pigs actually flying, but not worth betting on." His skepticism is shared by a growing number of critics as the year ends.

President Bush, for his part, has essentially shrugged off even the report's modest proposals. Notwithstanding the report's recommendations for an intensified effort to find a political solution, a plan for phased withdrawal, and dialogue with Iran and Syria, George Bush remains addicted and publicly committed to a policy of war and more war. As for the November elections, Bush astonishingly (but unsurprisingly for those familiar with the personality of the

president) just announced that he interpreted them as a call by “people not satisfied with the progress” in Iraq for “more bipartisan cooperation” with the administration on a plan for success in Iraq.

Bush’s long-overdue confession, just before Christmas that “we’re not winning,” in Iraq contrasts strikingly with his comment at a preelection news conference that “absolutely, we’re winning.” Asked about the discrepancy, the president defended his earlier assessment as a prediction.... “an indication of my *belief* (my emphasis) we’re going to win.” While his back-pedaling would appear perplexing and his excuses flabby in another statesman, they are completely consistent with a leader prone to faith-based reasoning and a penchant for a hyperbolic view of the world as he wants it to be. It is this confusion between beliefs and reality, with the world Bush wishes for substituting for what it in fact is, that most characterizes the administration’s foreign policy and accounts for its colossal blunders. Even right-wing commentator like Joe Scarborough on MSNBC are “growing more disturbed every night by how isolated George W. Bush has become,” asking as Scarborough did last week, if Bush is “determined or delusional?” Only Bush’s departed Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, can match the president for crafting his very own personal world: in one of his final statements at his valedictory press conference Rumsfeld declared to dropping jaws that Iraq looks quite calm if you are flying over it in a passenger jet.

The President’s tardy admission on Iraq, which at first seemed to inject a note of realism into the administration’s rhetoric, was in fact only a preface for Bush’s floating the idea of troop increases—as many as 30,000-- and his declaration the next day that “victory in Iraq is achievable.” At this writing the president stubbornly sticks to this position despite strong opposition to the idea of US troop increases for an ill-defined Iraqi mission by the uniformed leadership of the armed forces.

The Democrats are speaking again with two voices. Senate majority leader Harry Reed has accepted the possibility of troop increases and Senator Joseph Biden, new head of the Senate Foreign Relations committee and declared candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2008, is firmly opposing any increase, saying “it’s contrary to the overwhelming body of informed opinion, both inside and outside the administration.”

Under the US Constitutional system, Bush still retains considerable power to wage war with the Congress only able to exercise the power of the purse; i.e., withhold funding. Doing so also carries the risk that the majority Democrats will be blamed for endangering troops already there. Moreover, Congress is so evenly divided that it is unlikely it will be able to speak with one voice, at least until the situation in Iraq deteriorates enough to become a crushing reality that even the most hard-line Republicans cannot ignore. As 2006— a year that has been so terrible for Iraq—draws to a close, the only certainty is that in the coming year there will be Congressional pressure to investigate administration misrepresentations and wrongdoing as regards Iraq; there will be pressure as well on the administration to admit mistakes and at least modify its strategy to include talks with Iran and Syria and a plan for some kind of dignified withdrawal of US armed forces.

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