

Arab Perspective: Playing US Politics with Iraqi Blood for Oil

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Bracing for 2008 presidential election, US Democrats in opposition and the ruling Republicans have embroiled the American public in a political crisis between the executive and legislative powers over deadlines for combat operations in Iraq that could develop into a constitutional showdown, but for Arabs and Iraqis in particular it is merely playing electoral politics with Iraqi blood for oil because the Democratic Alternative for President George W. Bush's strategy, when scrutinized, promises them no fundamental change to the bloody status quo.

Building on the recommendation of the bipartisan Iraq Study Group of James Baker and Lee Hamilton, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi engaged Syrian leaders amid cautious Arab diplomatic and media welcome (1) after her arrival in Damascus on Tuesday in a visit that enraged President George W. Bush, in the latest manifestation of Democrat-Republican colliding approaches to secure American national interests in Iraq. Pelosi said she hoped to rebuild lost confidence between Washington and Damascus, but American politicians of both mainstream parties have a long way to go before they could win over the hearts and minds of the wider Arab masses and redress the negative public image of their country among Arabs, an image that the occupation of Iraq has damaged probably beyond repair for a long time to come.

Democrats were perceived by Arabs as promising to offer an alternative to Bush strategy in Iraq, but so far have merely proved themselves responsive to their voters' anti-war sentiments: 60 percent of the public wants to get out of Iraq, the election defeat of the Republicans was a strong indication of public sentiment, expectations have risen, yet the killing goes on, and in some ways gets worse. Yet the Democrats' supplemental budget bill provides funding to continue the war, while setting a controversial date to end it, and there is disagreement on its strategic effect. They could neither raise the "mission accomplished" banner nor could promise to do so in the near future, not even after Bush's constitutional mandate expires. How do frustrated Iraqis and Arabs make sense of "this" Democratic alternative?

Large majorities of Arabs want U.S. troops to leave Iraq sooner rather than later. According to a recent survey conducted between late February and early March in five pro-US Arab countries, namely Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, and Lebanon, and released in Washington D.C. on March 28 by the Arab American Institute (AAI) and Zogby International, a polling firm, 68 percent of Saudi respondents said they considered Washington's influence in Iraq as negative, 83 percent in Egypt, 96 percent in Jordan. An earlier two surveys in late November and early December conducted by Zogby International in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Morocco found not only that Washington's

standing in the Arab world had hit rock bottom, but also that Iran was the principal beneficiary.

Nearly three out of every four respondents in Egypt and Jordan said they favoured an immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops, while large pluralities in the other three countries favoured that option over withdrawal only after Iraq's unity and stability are assured, maintaining current U.S. troop strength, or increasing it, as the Bush administration is currently doing. Indeed, support for the latter two options was less than ten percent in every country except Saudi Arabia . In addition, 47 percent of Jordanian and 38 percent of Egyptian respondents said they worried more about the prospect of a permanent U.S. occupation of Iraq than about its partition, the spread of its civil war, or about the strengthening of Iran .

Similarly, 57 percent of Americans support a withdrawal from Iraq according to a recent Newsweek poll. The findings from the Pew Research Center earlier this week said 59 percent of Americans supported a withdrawal deadline. The Democrats rode to power last November on the public's discontent with the war in Iraq .

The growing public opposition in the United States to the war, the Democrats' electoral victory on an exit platform, which led them to the control of the Congress, and the American debate on the deadlines for exiting Iraq are all indeed public knowledge in Iraq as well as in Arab countries. However the Democratic "alternative" has yet to make its impact felt in a way that could improve the US image among Arabs and potentially this "alternative" will blacken that image further if and when it receives more scrutiny.

Would the Democrats' alternative end the occupation? Nothing is concrete and on record so far to indicate it would. Would it end the civil war? On the contrary it will make it worse as all statements by Democrat leaders point only to a "military redeployment" to extricate their troops out of the harm's way. How could a sectarian ruling elite, which is an integral part of the sectarian divide, end a sect-based strife on its own when they were unable to do so with the combined US-Iraqi forces? Moreover, is this so-called alternative essentially different from the Republicans' strategy? On the unity of Iraq , oil, long-term US military presence, civil war and the "benchmarks" set for the new Iraqi rulers both alternatives are essentially the same. Their looming showdown over deadlines for combat operations in Iraq would neither set a deadline for the end of Bush era in Iraq nor herald an end to the US era in the country.

True the House on March 23 voted 218 to 212 to stop paying for U.S. combat operations in Iraq as of August 31, 2008; on March 27 the Senate voted 50-48 for a deadline on March 31, 2008. The narrow margin of both votes emboldened Bush to confirm he will veto both. Congress obviously doesn't have the two-thirds majority necessary to override his veto. It is almost certain Bush is going to keep his combat troops in Iraq for as long as he wants, until the deadline set by the US constitution for his exit on January 20, 2009.

Only then the Bush era will end in Iraq to make room for carrying on the US era in the country either by a new Republican or Democrat administration, which will depend on the outcome of playing politics with more Iraqi blood. The congress will continue the deadline play after its recess for two weeks.

Meanwhile Bush, in defiance of American public opinion and his Democratic rivals, is

sending more troops to Iraq instead of bringing some back home, in a race against time to achieve a military success on the ground to pre-empt a Democratic electoral success next year, while the Democrats are manoeuvring to bet on his failure in Iraq to secure a victory in the US. Under the Bush administration's new Iraq policy announced earlier this year, the Pentagon has increased force levels in Iraq by about 30,000 troops. The United States has about 145,000 troops in Iraq .

Arab observers could not miss facts like that the Democrat-approved \$124 billion supplemental funding was more than Bush himself requested; "We gave him more than he asked for, we gave him every dime that he asked for," said House Majority Whip Democratic Rep. James E. Clyburn. The Senate March 27 vote on a withdrawal schedule was nonbinding on the President. Democrats only require Bush to seek Congressional approval before extending the occupation and spending new funds to do so. All these factors and more boil down to simply empowering Bush to continue his bloody war for at least one more year, until the eve of the next election; the Democratic leadership is viewed merely to appear to oppose the war while continuing to fund it.

Common Ground on 'Benchmarks'

Nor Arab observers, especially Iraqis, are missing the fact that the Democrats have adopted the same benchmarks laid out by Bush for the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Noori al-Maliki. The House bill of March 23 mandates these benchmarks for the Iraqi government. If the Iraqi government fails to meet those benchmarks, U.S. troops would be withdrawn at an earlier date. These benchmarks and the bipartisan consensus on them could only be interpreted as a bipartisan decision to empower the pro-US ruling Iraqi coalition to serve as Washington's proxy to combat the Iraqi anti-occupation resistance and terrorism, which boils down to nothing less than a decision to "Iraqize" the war, forgetting that the "vietnamization" was a bad precedent that failed to save the American neck in the Vietnam war.

" Iraq must take responsibility for its own future, and our troops should begin to come home," said Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada . The difference is only one of approach: Democrats seek to extricate US troops from the civil war militarily by redeploying them out of population centres and assigning their mission to Iraqis and diplomatically by engaging regional powers particularly Syria and Iran; Republicans want US military to enforce security first and install their Iraqi protagonists in the secured community centres before redeploying.

A second Bush-set and Democrat-adopted benchmark that the government of al-Maliki must meet concerns Iraq 's oil industry and Iraqi multibillion-dollar oil revenues. Both rivals agree that the new Iraqi oil law should be adopted this year to favour investing foreign oil companies with 70 percent of oil revenue to recoup their initial outlay, then companies can reap 20 percent of the profit without any tax or other restrictions on their transfers abroad. Both parties seek to distribute the oil revenues on ethnic and sectarian basis in accordance with the new draft hydrocarbon law. The Democrats had proposed that by July 1 of this year Bush must certify that progress is being made on these issues or US "withdrawal" will begin within 180 days. The wide spread Iraqi opposition to this law is a major contributor to the civil war.

On maintaining the territorial integrity and unity of Iraq there is also a Democratic - Republican consensus on "federalism," which is also another contributor to civil war.

Senator Joe Biden, the top Democrat in the Senate on foreign relations matters and a presidential prospect for 2008, envisions an Iraqi “confederation” and not an Iraqi republic: “On Iraq , there is a Democratic alternative. And the bottom line of the alternative is that we’re going to have to figure out how this president or the next president, whoever it is, how long it goes, turns around and makes sure there’s more autonomy for each of the sectors that are there, the Sunni, the Shia and the Kurds,” he said. (2) The Arab leaders during their summit meeting in the Saudi Arabian capital of Riyadh on March 29-30 demanded the US-sponsored Iraqi constitution that stipulates federalism be reconsidered because it adversely affects the Iraqi national unity and the Arab identity of Iraq .

Similarly both electoral rivals want a US long-term military “presence” in Iraq . The White House certainly isn’t expecting to maintain 160,000 troops in Iraq indefinitely, but it is planning a long-term occupation anchored in what the Pentagon has described as “enduring bases” and continues to construct these huge, imposing bases. Democrats too are on record as saying they want a long-term similar presence. The March 27 Senate resolution provides for a “limited number” of troops after the pullout date, which would be devoted to training and to “targeted counterterrorism operations.” Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden had this to say: “I think we’re going to be left with the reality of something the size of a brigade, somewhere in the region, to make sure that the terrorists cannot occupy territory.”

Biden says the “least important part” of the Iraq spending bill that recently cleared the U.S. House and Senate is its target date for withdrawal of troops. More importantly “it redefines the mission of our troops from fighting in the midst of a civil war to doing what is rational for them to do, which is to continue to train Iraqi Army, to deny al Qaida occupation of swaths of territory...and three for so-called source protection — protecting our own forces,” Biden says. (3)

Another presidential hopeful, Hillary Clinton, who voted for the Iraq war resolution in October 2002, said she would retain a significant residual occupying force in Iraq to “contain the extremists,” “help the Kurds manage their various problems in the north,” “provide logistical support, air support, training support” to the Iraqi government, and to carry out larger geopolitical responsibilities like trying “to prevent Iran from crossing the border and having too much influence inside of Iraq.” Former Pentagon comptroller Dov Zakheim, who has developed a strikingly similar plan, estimates that 75,000 American troops would be needed to carry his plan out. That’s about half of the current force stationed in Iraq . (4)

Democrats, Republicans or whoever regardless, “the point in the Middle East ... is that this is center of the world’s energy resources. Originally the British and secondarily the French had dominated it, but after the Second World War, it’s been a U.S. preserve. That’s been an axiom of U.S. foreign policy, that it must control Middle East energy resources. It is not a matter of access as people often say. Once the oil is on the seas it goes anywhere. In fact if the United States used no Middle East oil, it’d have the same policies. If we went on solar energy tomorrow, it’d keep the same policies. Just look at the internal record, or the logic of it, the issue has always been control. Control is the source of strategic power.” (5)

Bush remains delusional. He insists that he’ll keep U.S. forces in Iraq until they achieve “victory.” Democrats challenge him to achieve the same “victory” differently! What does that mean?

Anti-war protesters in Washington and outside Pelosi’s home in San Francisco were denouncing her and other congressional Democrats for not cutting off the money to fight

the war in Iraq . If the war in Iraq is such an unnecessary and futile expenditure of blood and treasure as Pelosi and other Democrats have been saying, why not put an end to it? Their congressional resolutions put them on record as being against the war without taking the responsibility for ending it, they said.

A successful conclusion of Bush's new strategy in Iraq war before the 2008 elections can be a political disaster for Democrats; his failure can doom Republican electoral prospects. Many American analysts expect the civil war in Iraq to seriously shape the U.S. presidential election next year. Both Democratic and the Republican approaches simply seek to leave it to the Iraqis to fight it out among themselves, which will inevitably exacerbate "that" civil war: For Americans it is the usual political power struggle. For Arabs it is playing American politics with Iraqi blood for oil.

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Notes

- (1) See for example the UAE's Khaleej Times editorial on April 4, 2007.
- (2) MSNBC, March 31, 2006.
- (3) Ibid.
- (4) John B. Judis, The New Republic, 03.30.07.
- (5) Noam Chomsky, interviewed by Michael Shank, International Relations Center (IRC), February 9, 2007.

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