

# U.S. - Iran Power Struggle over Iraq

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U.S. Ambassador Christopher Hill's warning on February 18 that it could take months to form a new government in Baghdad after the Iraqi elections, scheduled for March 7, and that in turn could mean considerable political turmoil in Iraq, and the warnings of observers and experts as well as officials against the looming specter of a renewed sectarian war in the country, indicate that security, stability, let alone democracy, and a successful "victorious" withdrawal of American troops from Iraq have all yet a long way to go. A secure, stable and democratic Iraq will have first to wait for an end to the raging power struggle over Iraq between the United States and Iran inside and outside the occupied Arab country.

The Associated Press quoted Hill as predicting "some tough days, violent days as well, some intemperate days" ahead of the March 7 vote. The warnings raise serious questions about U.S. Vice President Joe Biden's statement a few days ago calling Iraq the "great achievement" for the Obama Administration. Neither Biden nor President Barak Obama are able yet to declare that the United States has won victory in Iraq. In 2007, both men advised the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq, but former President George W. Bush opted instead for the military "surge," which the Obama Administration is now "responsibly" drawing down. However, neither the surge nor the drawdown have produced their declared aim, a secure democracy; instead a pro-Iran sectarian regime is evolving.

The upcoming Iraqi elections, scheduled for March 7, have already embroiled the two major American and Iranian beneficiaries of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 in an open power struggle that neither party cares any more to contain within the limits of the bilateral tacit understanding on security coordination that was formalized through dozens of public and behind-the-scenes 'dialogue' meetings in Baghdad between U.S. ambassadors Ryan Crocker and Zalmay Khalilzad and their Iranian counterparts, until the term of the Bush administration was over. This open power struggle indicates as well that the honey moon of their bilateral security coordination in Iraq is either over, or about to, a very bad omen for the Iraqi people.

Despite trumpeting the drums of war, the Barak Obama administration is still on record committed to what the Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, described in the Saudi capital Riyadh on February 15 as the "dual track approach" of simultaneously massing for war and diplomacy given teeth by building an international consensus on anti-Iran sanctions under the umbrella of the United Nations. Adding to this the fact that Washington is restraining a unilateral Israeli attack on Iran and postponing its positive response to Israeli insistent demand for war as the only option, and the fact that the U.S. military in Iraq are capable of confronting the Iranian militias and intelligence networks inside Iraq, but choosing not to do so yet, are all indicators that Washington is still eyeing a power sharing arrangement with Iran in Iraq.

However, Tehran could not be forthcoming to forgo its anti-U.S. leverage in Iraq as long as Washington continues its current strategy to settle the scores of the U.S.-Iran power struggle inside Iraq by moving the struggle to the Iranian homeland itself. Moreover Tehran is desperately reciprocating this U.S. strategy by trying to disrupt the Arab launching pad of the anti-Iran front, which Clinton said in Riyadh that her administration is “working actively with our regional and international partners” to build, wherever Iran could do so, from the Palestinian Gaza and Lebanon to Yemen. Washington is exploiting “Iran’s increasingly disturbing and destabilizing actions,” according to Clinton on the same occasion, as an additional *casus belli* for convincing Arab partners to join that front. U.S. and Iran are turning the entire Middle East with its Arab heartland into an arena of a bloody tit-for-tat game, with Iraq as the end game prize.

The wider U.S. – Iranian conflict in the Middle East is one over Iraq, and not over Iran itself. The Israeli and the Palestinian factors are merely a distracting side show and a propaganda ploy for both protagonists in their psychological warfare to win the hearts and minds of the helpless Arabs, Palestinians in particular, who are crushed unmercifully under their war machines, left with the religious heritage as the only outlet to seek refuge and salvage, while the 22 member states of the Arab League are cornered into a choice between the worse and the worst.

Expectantly therefore, Clinton had almost nothing of substance to say about Iraq during her joint press conference with her Saudi counterpart Prince Saud Al Faisal on Monday, who however, for explicit geopolitical reasons, could not ignore the Iraqi issue: “We hope that the forthcoming elections will realize the aspirations of the Iraqi people to achieve security, stability, and territorial integrity and to consolidate its national unity on the basis of equality among all Iraqis irrespective of their beliefs and sectarian differences and to protect their country against any foreign intervention in their affairs,” he told reporters.

But “foreign intervention,” or more to the point foreign U.S. military and Iranian paramilitary occupation, is exactly what would doom the prince’s hopes to wishful thinking.

The editorial of The Washington Post on January 20, headlined “Obama administration must intervene in Iraqi election crisis,” was in fact misleading because the U.S. intervention has never stopped for a moment in “sovereign” Iraq.

Militarily, U.S. Lt. Col. Robert Fruehwald and Iraqi Staff Major General Shakir, for example, have been working together the past nine months to prepare for the upcoming elections in the Kadhimiya district of Baghdad; the same applies to every Iraqi district in every Iraqi governorate. Under the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), American troops are supposed to remain outside urban centres and all military operations are to be conducted with Iraqi government approval. On the ground, the U.S. military “advisors” are embedded throughout the Iraqi security forces, selecting targets and directing operations that are supported as required by massive air bombing.

Politically, all “secretaries” and senior administration officials that have whatever to do with Iraq are on record as to who and whom the elections “should” and “must” include or exclude. For example, “No Baathist” should ever stand for elections, U.S. ambassador to Iraq Christopher Hills had said. Contradicting Hills, Clinton had said “the United States would oppose” any exclusion. On February 10, Vice President Joe Biden, appearing on CNN’s Larry King Live, voiced pride in his record intervention: “I’ve been there 17 times now. I go about

every two months, three months. I know every one of the major players in all the segments of that society.” On February 4, The New York Times, in an editorial, said Biden was in Baghdad “to press the government” on who to run in the elections; Iraqi President Jalal Talabani confirmed that Biden had proposed “that the disqualifications (of candidates) be deferred until after the election.”

President Obama, who said recently that “we are responsibly leaving Iraq to its people,” should watch out for his credibility against the contradictory and contradicting statements of his aides.

Similarly, Iran has self-imposed itself as the arbiter of Iraqi politics. The official Tehran Times, in an editorial written by a “staff writer,” defended the disqualification of candidates because they are “mostly the remnants of the Baathist regime” who are supported by “certain Arab countries.” Iranian “contested” President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on the 31st anniversary of the Islamic revolution accused the U.S. — which is still paying “a horrible price,” according to Biden, for uprooting the Baath party from power — of trying to impose the Baath party back into power. Nejad’s mouthpiece in Iraq, Ahmed Chalabi — who was the darling of the U.S. neoconservatives of the Bush administration, whose reports were cited by them as the casus belli for the invasion of Iraq, who turned out a double agent for Iran, and who is trying to ban those Iraqi politicians most opposed to Iran’s growing influence in Iraq with an eye on the next premiership — in a press conference on February 14, “condemned the U.S. intervention in Iraqi affairs,” citing Biden and Hills as examples.

The “horrible price” of the Iraqi invasion, which Biden referred to in his NBC’s “Meet the Press” on February 15, is yet to come. Chalabi was not a lone pro-Iran voice in Iraq to brave a challenge to U.S. strategy. Prime Minister Noori Al Maliki was on record as saying that, “We will not allow American Ambassador Christopher Hill to go beyond his diplomatic mission;” his aides called for the expulsion of Hill. These are professional politicians. What are their resources to brave challenge the U.S., whose soldiers are protecting them and whose taxpayers’ money has financed them, had not been for their Iranian credentials?

“Despite the presence of more than 100,000 US troops, America’s influence in Iraq is fading fast — and Iran’s is growing,” Robert Dreyfuss wrote in a column titled “Bad to Worse in Iraq” in The Nation on February 8, adding: “As soon as George W. Bush made the fateful decision to sweep away the Iraqi government and install pro-Iranian exiles in Baghdad, the die was cast. President Obama has no choice but to pack up and leave.”

Self-proclaimed nationalist seculars, who have been and are still an integral part of the U.S. — engineered so-called Iraqi “political process,” are now losing their battle in this process. De-Baathification, which was originally a U.S. trade mark of Paul Bremer, the first civil governor of Iraq after the U.S.-led invasion of 2003, is merely a pretext to disqualify whoever opposes Iran or its sectarian agenda in Iraq. A pro-Iran sectarian regime is evolving to exclude not only secularism and democracy but to cement an Iranian power base in Iraq that will sooner or later spread sectarianism all over the region, instead of turning the country into a launching pad for democracy in the Middle East, as promised by the U.S. neoconservatives to justify their invasion of the country seven years ago.

Thomas Ricks, the Pulitzer Prize-winning military correspondent and former Washington Post Pentagon correspondent, has suggested recently that ““at the end of the surge, the fundamental political problems facing Iraq were the same ones as when it began. The theory of the surge was that improved security would lead to a political breakthrough. It didn’t. The

improved security opened a window, but didn't lead to a political breakthrough. In that sense, the surge failed."

Ricks however fails to note that the imminent drawdown of American troops in Iraq is about to take place on the backdrop of that "failure," and that the drawdown like the surge before it is doomed to failure for the same reason, namely the sectarian regime which both did their best to sustain as their agent in Iraq.

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