

No Exit: A Hand Grenade over the Shoulder

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Asia Times Online - **Pepe Escobar** - Like the ill-fated British campaign in Mesopotamia of the 1920's, a defeated America seems now determined to [thro](#)
[w Iraq into chaos](#)

as a parting gesture. -

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http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/GF10Ak03.html

THE ROVING EYE

[Exit strategy: Civil war](#)

By Pepe Escobar

[Asia Times Online](#)

June 12, 2005

"In reality, the electoral process was designed to legitimize the occupation, rather than ridding the country of the occupation ... Anyone who sees himself capable of bringing about political reform should go ahead and try, but my belief is that the occupiers won't allow him."

- Shi'ite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr

As Shi'ites and Kurds fought for three months to come up with an Iraqi cabinet, it is emerging from Baghdad that soon a broad front will emerge on the political scene composed of politicians, religious leaders, clan and tribal sheikhs - basically Sunni but with Shi'ite participation - with a single-minded agenda: the end of the US-led occupation.

This front will include, among others, what we have termed the Sinn Fein component of the resistance, the powerful Sunni Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS) and the Sadrists. It will refuse any kind of dialogue with new Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari and his government unless there's a definite timetable for the complete withdrawal of the occupation forces. Even the top Marine in Iraq, Major General Stephen Johnson, has admitted, "There will be no progress as long as the insurgents are not implicated in a political process."

But the proliferation of what many moderate Sunnis and Shi'ites suspect as being Pentagon-organized black ops is putting the emergence of this front in jeopardy. This is obvious when we see Harith al-Dhari - the AMS leader - blaming the Badr Brigades (the armed wing of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution - SCIRI - in Iraq, a major partner in the government)

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for the killing of Sunni Arab clerics.

Breaking up Iraq

Several Iranian websites have widely reported a plan to break up Iraq into three Shi'ite southern mini-states, two Kurdish mini-states and one Sunni mini-state - with Baghdad as the seat of a federal government. Each mini-state would be in charge of law and order and the economy within its own borders, with Baghdad in charge of foreign policy and military coordination. The plan was allegedly conceived by David Philip, a former White House adviser working for the American Foreign Policy Council (AFPC). The AFPC is financed by the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, which has also funded both the ultra-hawkish Project for a New American Century and American Enterprise Institute.

The plan would be "sold" under the admission that the recently elected, Shi'ite-dominated Jaafari government is incapable of controlling Iraq and bringing the Sunni Arab guerrillas to the negotiating table. More significantly, the plan is an exact replica of an extreme right-wing Israeli plan to balkanize Iraq - an essential part of the balkanization of the whole Middle East. Curiously, Henry Kissinger was selling the same idea even before the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Once again this is classic divide and rule: the objective is the perpetuation of Arab disunity. Call it Iraqification; what it actually means is sectarian fever translated into civil war. Operation Lightning - the highly publicized counter-insurgency tour de force with its 40,000 mostly Shi'ite troops rounding up Sunni Arabs - can be read as the first salvo of the civil war. Vice President Dick Cheney all but admitted the whole plan on CNN, confidently predicting that "the fighting will end before the Bush administration leaves office".

But the destiny awaiting this counter-insurgency may be best evaluated by comparing it to Gillo Pontecorvo's 1966 classic, *The Battle of Algiers* - one of the most influential political films ever, and supposedly a "must see" at the Pentagon. The French in Algeria in the early 1960s did indeed break the back of the guerrillas - but in the end lost the Algerian war. Talking about Vietnamization - the precursor to Iraqification - the Vietcong's Tet offensive in 1968 was lethal, but the counter-insurgency - Operation Phoenix - was even more lethal. In the end, though, the US also lost the war.

There's no Operation Phoenix going on in Iraq. The US has little "humint" (human intelligence), so it is incapable of penetrating the complex resistance tribal net - and not only because of its

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cultural and linguistic shortcomings. Even a west Baghdad neighborhood such as Adhamiyah is essentially an independent guerrilla republic. The daily, dreadful car-bombing litany will persist: whatever intelligence it comes across, the Pentagon does not share it with the Iraqi police, and the Iraqi police for its part is not exactly the best.

The US also does not have sufficient troops - so it has to resort to doomed Iraqification, using Shi'ites and Kurds to fight Sunnis. And to top it all, the US is blocked in the political sphere, because the real intelligence victory would mean convincing Sunni Arabs of the legitimacy of the political process: it's not going to happen, with only two Sunni Arabs in the 55-member committee in charge of drafting the new Iraqi constitution, and with Shi'ite death squads killing Sunni Arabs.

Militia inferno

In Iraq's current militia inferno, some are more respectable than others. The 100,000-strong Kurdish peshmerga are not forced to disarm because they are American allies. The Sadrist's Mehdi Army on the other hand is regarded as a bunch of thugs because it responds to the maverick Muqtada al-Sadr - whom the Pentagon still considers an enemy. Iraq's Interior Ministry is infested by at least six separate militias - half of them responding to former prime minister Iyad Allawi's pals. Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, a Kurd, is busy praising the peshmerga. Abdul-Salam al-Qubeisi, an AMS spokesman, doesn't skip a beat, saying that Talabani is following "US policies to prolong the struggle in Iraq and turn it into an Iraq-Iraq conflict". In other words: he unmasks Iraqification.

The Badr Brigades - renamed Badr Organization - for its part is accused by the AMS of giving intelligence to the notorious Wolf Brigade, still another militia (or, euphemistically, "elite commando unit") operating in the Interior Ministry but under a top SCIRI official.

Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, the SCIRI leader and eminence grise behind Jaafari, went on record vociferously defending the Badr. In a priceless linguistic stretch mixing Bushism with Arab nationalism, Hakim said that "forces of evil" are trying to "sully the reputation of nationalist movements like Badr so that they can achieve goals that do not serve the interests of the Iraqi people".

One wonders whether Pentagon black ops are also part of these "forces of evil". In October 2002, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld invented a secret army - one of his pet projects.

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According to the Pentagon's Defense Science Board, the goal of Rumsfeld's army - the 100-member, US\$100 million-a-year Proactive, Preemptive Operations Group (P2OG) - would carry out secret operations designed to "stimulate reactions" among "terrorist groups", thus exposing them to "counter-attack" by the P2OG. The stock in trade of Rumsfeld's army is assassinations, sabotage, deception, the whole arsenal of black ops. Iraq is the perfect lab for it. "Iraqification" means in fact "Salvadorization". No wonder old faces are back in the game. James Steele, leader of a Special Forces team in El Salvador in the early 1980s, is in Iraq. Steve Casteel, a former top official involved in the "drug wars" in Bolivia, Peru and Colombia, is also in Iraq. He is a senior adviser in - where else - the Interior Ministry, to which friendly militias are subordinated.

Guerrillas forever

For all their complex, interlocking strands, it is the Sunni Arab guerrillas who are now operating almost like a united front. Their full thrust is against what is denounced as a puppet government controlled by the US and its "foreign allies" - exiles, pro-Iranian Shi'ites and splittist Kurds. Guerrilla leaders admit the reality of superior American firepower, which should be fought with "the ideals of pure Islam" - courage, piety, abnegation, spirit of sacrifice. "Victory" is the struggle itself.

This essentially means, for most groups, the absence of any alternative political project - no possibility of guerrillas as a whole adhering to a Sunni-Shi'ite united political front. The military strategy of the guerrillas is to prevent any possibility of normalization: or, to put it another way, to force the Sunni Arab population to accept their methods. It may be impossible for the resistance to become an Iraqi nationalist movement; but it may rely on 5 million Sunni Arabs as a very strong base for a prolonged, successful guerrilla war. They certainly have the means to destabilize the country for decades, if they're up for it.

From an ideological point of view, the guerrilla leaders must have analyzed the degree of dependence of Jaafari's government, and concluded that the Americans will not go away. And even if the Americans did decide to leave, this would be a major problem because it would shatter the unity of so many guerrilla groups with different agendas, but with a common goal of ousting the occupiers.

Rival branches of the former Ba'ath Party now have the upper hand in the resistance - although they don't control it wholesale. Despite all the internal wrangling - from fervent pro-Syrians in the red corner to those in favor of political accommodation in the blue corner - they are united by the same objectives. They have a lot of money, stashed before the fall of Saddam Hussein; they

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have legions of former Republican Guard and Mukhabarat (intelligence) officers (the guerrillas have at least 40,000 active members, plus a supporting cast of 80,000); they have loads of weapons (at least 250,000 tons remaining); they can enjoy a non-stop flow of financing, especially from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf; and they can count on crucial tactical support by a few hundred Arab jihadis.

Who gets the oil?

Sunni Arabs and Kurds are virtually on the brink of civil war in northern Iraq: the daily situation in both Kirkuk and Mosul is explosive - ambushes, assassinations, car bombings - but scarce information filters south to Baghdad and to the outside world. Kirkuk is nominally under Kurd control. But what the Kurds want most of all is to control Northern Oil - part of the Iraqi National Oil Co, in charge of the oilfields west of Kirkuk. Sunni Arabs say "over our dead bodies". No wonder the key local battlefield is the oil pipeline crossing Kirkuk province: it was blown up again this Wednesday.

Mosul, a big city of almost 1.8 million people on the banks of the Tigris, is still controlled by Sunni Arabs (70% of the population) and remains the epicenter of Arab nationalism and a major guerrilla base. Kurds there maintain the lowest of profiles. Both the guerrillas and the police come from the very powerful Sunni Shammar tribe. The Pentagon favors the Kurds - helplessly, one might say: they are the only US allies. US intelligence in Mosul depends on Kurdish intelligence: one more recipe for civil war. As if this was not enough, most Shi'ites - 60% of Iraq's population - now firmly believe they are facing a Machiavellian plot by the US, the Kurds, the Sunni Arabs or all of the above to rob the Shi'ites of political power.

The national liberation front

The major Iraqi resistance groups are not in favor of targeting innocent Iraqi civilians. Many groups have political liaisons who try to tell the world's media what they are fighting for. Considering that American corporate media exclusively reproduce the Pentagon line, there's widespread suspicion - in the Middle East, Western Europe, Latin America, parts of Asia - of American media complicity in the occupation, incompetence, racism, or perhaps all of the above.

The antidote to the Iraqi militia inferno should be a united Sunni-Shi'ite political front. Former electricity minister Ayham al-Samarie told the Associated Press that at least two guerrilla groups - the Islamic Army in Iraq and the Army of Mujahideen - were ready to talk with the Jaafari government and eventually join the political process. The conditions though are explicit: a set

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date for the American withdrawal.

Against all odds, a national liberation front is emerging in Iraq. Washington hawks may see it coming, but they certainly don't want it. Many groups in this front have already met in Algiers. The front is opposed to the American occupation and permanent Pentagon military bases; opposed to the privatization and corporate looting of the Iraqi economy; and opposed to the federation of Iraq, ie balkanization. Members of the front clearly see through the plan of fueling sectarianism to provoke an atmosphere of civil war, thus legitimizing the American presence. The George W Bush administration's obsession in selling the notion that Iraqis - or "anti-Iraqi forces", or "foreign militants" - are trying to start a civil war in the eastern flank of the Arab nation is as ludicrous as the myth it sells of the resistance as just a lunatic bunch of former Ba'athists and Wahhabis.

The Bush administration though is pulling no punches with Iraqification. It's a Pandora's box: inside one will find the Battle of Algiers, Vietnam, El Salvador, Colombia. All point to the same destination: civil war. This deadly litany could easily go on until 2020 when, in a brave new world of China emerging as the top economy, Sunni Arabs would finally convince themselves to perhaps strike a deal with Shi'ites and Kurds so they can all profit together by selling billions of barrels of oil to the Chinese oil majors. If, of course, there is any semblance of Iraq left at that point.

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