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Status of Forces Agreement

Noam Chomsky

August 9, 2008

The roots of US interest in Iraq were explained lucidly a few weeks ago by the editors of the Washington Post, the country's premier political daily. Iraq "lies at the geopolitical center of the Middle East and contains some of the world's largest oil reserves," the editors observed, admonishing Barack Obama for regarding Afghanistan as "the central front" for the United States. "While the United States has an interest in preventing the resurgence of the Afghan Taliban," they explained, "the country's strategic importance pales beside that of Iraq."

Until recently such forthright honesty was regarded as improper. Like most acts of aggression, the invasion of Iraq was routinely portrayed as self-defense against an ominous and implacable foe and guided by noble and selfless objectives. But as Iraqi resistance makes it more difficult to install a dependable client regime, and concerns mount that the US might have to allow Iraqis a degree of sovereignty and independence beyond what was intended, the standard fairy tales are no longer adequate to the task of mobilizing domestic opinion to tolerate policy decisions. They are by no means abandoned, but increasingly they are being put to the side in favor of a clearer expo-

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sition of why US power centers must do whatever they can to control Iraq.

There is nothing new about the insights of the Post editors. Since World War II the US government has recognized that the energy resources of the Middle East are “a stupendous source of strategic power” and “one of the greatest material prizes in world history. In President Eisenhower’s words, primarily for these reasons the Gulf region is the “most strategically important area of the world.” US control is even more important now than before with the prospects of oil becoming a diminishing resource in a world economy that is heavily dependent on fossil fuels for its functioning. Furthermore, the global system is less subject to US domination than in the past so that competition for these great material prizes is becoming more intense, and control of “some of the world’s largest oil reserves...at the geopolitical center of the Middle East” is of paramount importance for US power centers.

There should never have been any serious doubt that these were the basic reasons for the US invasion of Iraq, and for its current intention to maintain Iraq as a client state and base for US power in the region, with privileged access to its resources for the Western (primarily US) oil majors. These intentions were outlined with fair clarity in the Declaration of Principles released by the White House in November 2007, an agreement between Bush and the Maliki government.

The Declaration permits US forces to remain indefinitely to “deter foreign aggression” and to provide “security.” The phrase “foreign aggression” presumably refers to Iran, though the government deliberations and pronouncements make it clear that Washington’s concern is with Iranian influence, not the highly unlikely circumstance of aggression – and of course the concept of US aggression does not exist. As for security, it is understood on all sides that there can be no thought of providing security for a government that would reject US domination.

erations. Turkey became the leading recipient of US arms, apart from Israel-Egypt, a separate category. Clinton provided 80% of Turkish arms, doing his utmost to ensure that Turkish violence would succeed. Virtual media silence made a significant contribution to these efforts.

Great power policies answer to the same institutional structures and imperatives as before. There have been no miraculous moral conversions. Kurds neglect the history of betrayal and violence at their peril. How they should deal with today’s complex circumstances is not for outsiders to say, but at the very least, they should proceed without illusions of benign intent and dedication to noble goals. History makes a mockery of such inevitable posturing on the part of governments, media, and the educated classes rather generally. Particularly for those who are vulnerable, clear-eyed skepticism and rational analysis should be high priority.

can be dismissed as irrelevant nonsense in favor of self-serving doctrinal fantasies. Victims do not have that luxury.

Kurds can hardly afford to overlook the grim history of betrayal at the hands of the reigning superpower. The highlights are all too familiar. In 1975, for cynical great power reasons, Washington handed Iraqi Kurds to the tender mercies of Saddam Hussein. In the 1980s, the US-Saddam alliance was so close that the Reagan administration barred even mild protest over the al-Anfal massacres, while also seeking to blame the Halabja gassing on Iran. George Bush I went so far as to invite Iraqi nuclear engineers to the US in 1989 for advanced training in weapons production; the Shah's nuclear programs had had strong support from Kissinger, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz and others. So deep was Bush's admiration for Saddam that in April 1990, only a few months before Saddam's invasion of Kuwait, Bush sent a high-level Senatorial delegation to Iraq to convey his good wishes to his friend in Baghdad and to assure him that he could disregard the occasional criticisms voiced in the US media. The delegation was led by Senate majority leader Bob Dole, Republican presidential candidate a few years later, and included other prominent Senators. At the same time Bush overrode bans in order to provide new loans to Saddam, with the "goal of increasing U.S. exports and [to] put us in a better position to deal with Iraq regarding its human rights record..." the government announced without shame, eliciting no commentary.

In the 1990s, it was the Kurdish population of Turkey that suffered the most brutal repression. Tens of thousands were killed, thousands of towns and villages were destroyed, millions driven from the lands and homes, with hideous barbarity and torture. The Clinton administration gave crucial support throughout, providing Turkey lavishly with means of destruction. In the single year 1997, Clinton sent more arms to Turkey than the US sent to this major ally during the entire Cold War period combined up to the onset of the counterinsurgency op-

The Declaration also commits Iraq to facilitate and encourage "the flow of foreign investments to Iraq, especially American investments," an oblique reference to privileged access to "some of the world's largest oil reserves." This brazen expression of imperial will was underscored when Bush quietly issued yet another of his hundreds of "signing statements"; these are among the devices employed by the Bush administration to concentrate historically unprecedented power in the state executive. In this signing statement, Bush declared that he will ignore congressional legislation that interferes with the establishment of "any military installation or base for the purpose of providing for the permanent stationing of United States Armed Forces in Iraq," and will also ignore any congressional legislation that impedes White House actions "to exercise United States control of the oil resources of Iraq." The signing statement is an even more brazen expression of imperial will than the Bush-Maliki Declaration, and yet another expression of the utter contempt for democracy that has been a hallmark of the administration, at home and abroad.

Shortly before, the New York Times had reported that Washington "insists that the Baghdad government give the United States broad authority to conduct combat operations," a demand that "faces a potential buzz saw of opposition from Iraq, with its...deep sensitivities about being seen as a dependent state." These "deep sensitivities" are regarded as a form of third world irrationality and emotionalism, which have to be overcome by a well-crafted combination of propaganda (called "public diplomacy") and coercion. In July 2008, the US Air Force released a detailed plan for Iraq operations "for the foreseeable future," the New York Times reported, eliciting no notable comment.

Two years ago, John Pike, a leading specialist on military affairs, wrote that the US will find "all kinds of reasons" for not leaving Iraq. The core of a modern army is logistics, and as Pike observed, the US has been maintaining control of logistics

and advanced weaponry. The US is training Iraqi combat units, but not support units. Under this conception, Iraq may provide bodies for combat, like Indian sepoy and Gurkhas under the British Raj, but Iraqi forces are to rely on supply and direction by the US and basic decisions are to reside in US hands. The Iraqi military had no combat planes and only a few tanks. Iraq is a US “protectorate,” Pike wrote, without an independent military force. Though much is shrouded in secrecy, that picture seems to remain generally valid.

The Pentagon is continuing to build huge military bases around the country, all funded by the Democrat-controlled Congress, which also funds the construction of the enormous US “embassy” in Baghdad, a city within a city that is quite unlike any authentic embassy in the world. These massive constructions are not being built to be abandoned or destroyed. Democrats have proposed withdrawal plans, but as General Kevin Ryan concluded in a detailed examination, they might more accurately be described as “re-missioning.” And though Washington is surely aware of the overwhelming popular demand in Iraq for a firm timetable for withdrawal of US forces – for a large majority, within a year or less – the administration has been willing to commit itself only to a meaningless “general time horizon,” glossing over questions of scale and mission.

More specific are the plans to reconstitute something like the Iraq Petroleum Company that was established under British rule to permit Western Oil majors “to dine off Iraq’s wealth in a famously exploitative deal,” as British journalist Seamus Milne observed, commenting on the resurrection of the IPC. The companies that constituted the IPC are being granted an inside track on development and control of Iraqi oil in no-bid contracts. The pretext is that they had been providing “free advice” – as had Russia’s Lukoil, the one major company not permitted to join the reconstituted IPC consortium. The goal, surely, is to grant Western oil majors the kind of control over

this incomparable “material prize” that they lost worldwide – in Iraq as well – during the nationalizations of the 1970s. Meanwhile, with Washington’s support, Texas-based Hunt oil has established itself in Kurdistan, and State Department officials in Basra contacted Hunt executives to encourage them to pursue yet “another opportunity,” an enormous port and natural gas project in the south.

In brief, Washington’s intention, expressed by now with fair clarity, is that Iraq should remain a client state, allowing permanent US military installations (called “enduring,” to assuage Iraqi sensibilities). It is to grant the US the right to conduct combat and air operations at will, and to ensure Western (primarily US) investors priority in accessing its huge oil resources. None of this should surprise observers who are not blinded by doctrine.

Iraqis have never passively accepted domination by outside powers, and Washington will face no easy task in imposing it today. Inadvertently, the Bush administration has been strengthening Iran’s interests in Iraq, supporting many of its closest allies in Iraq’s political and military institutions while Iran also enhances commercial and cultural interactions, supply of electricity, and other actions. Doubtless Iran hopes that a friendly Shi’ite-controlled state will become firmly established on its borders, possibly even with strengthened links to neighboring areas of Saudi Arabia with a large Shi’ite population, where most of Saudi oil is located. All of this would be a nightmare from Washington’s perspective, even more so if the region moves towards association with the China-based Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which includes the Central Asian states and Russia, with India, Pakistan and Iran having observer status (denied to the US).

For Iraqi Kurds, current circumstances offer new and challenging opportunities, and also difficult choices. However such choices are made, it should be done without illusions. For the rich and powerful, illusions are not too dangerous, and history