

Haunting Mistakes in Iraq

By Gareth Porter | February 12, 2007

The supreme irony of President George W. Bush's campaign to blame Iran for the sectarian civil war in Iraq, as well as attacks on U.S. forces, is that the Shiite militias that started to drive the Sunnis out of the Baghdad area in 2004—and thus precipitated the present sectarian crisis—did so with the support of both Iran and the neoconservative U.S. war planners.

The U.S. policy decisions that led to the sectarian war can be traced back to the conviction of a group of right-wing zealots—with close ties to Israel's Likud Party—that overthrowing Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq would not destabilize the region because Iraqi Shiites would be allies of the United States and Israel against Iran.

The idea that Iraqi Shiites could be used to advance U.S. power interests in the Middle East was part of a broader right-wing strategy for joint U.S.-Israeli "rollback" of Israel's enemies. In 1996, a task force led in part by Richard Perle at the Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies (IASPS), a right-wing Israeli think tank, advised Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that such a strategy should begin by taking control of Iraq and putting in place a pro-Israeli regime.

Three years later, the former IASPS director, David Wurmser, who had migrated to the neoconservative American Enterprise Institute (AEI), spelled out how the United States could use Iraqi Shiites to support that strategy in his book *Tyranny's Ally: America's Failure to Defeat Saddam Hussein* (featuring a foreword by none other than Perle). Wurmser sought to refute the realist argument that overthrowing Hussein would destroy the balance of power between Sunni-controlled Iraq and Shiite-dominated Iran on which regional stability depended.

Wurmser proposed replacing the existing "dual containment" policy toward Iran and Iraq with what he called "dual rollback." He did not deny that taking down Hussein's regime would "generate upheaval in Iraq," but he welcomed that prospect, which would "offer the oppressed, majority Shiites of that country an opportunity to enhance their power and prestige."

Whereas the realists had assumed the Iraqi Shiites would be "Iran's fifth column," Wurmser argued that Iraq's Shiite clerics would "present a challenge to Iran's influence and revolution." He cited their rejection of the

central concept of the Ayatollah Khomeini's Iranian Revolution—the "rule of the jurispudent"—justifying clerical rule. From that notion, Wurmser concluded that Iraqi Shiites would be U.S. allies in promoting a "regional rollback of Shiite fundamentalism." Wurmser even suggested that Iraqi Shiites could help pry Lebanese Shiites, with whom they had enjoyed close ties historically, away from the influence of Hezbollah and Iran.

Wurmser was close to the key officials in the Pentagon and the White House who were planning the invasion of Iraq: Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith. After 9/11, it was Wurmser who set up the now-infamous "Policy Counterterrorism Evaluation Group" in Feith's office to produce evidence that could be used to justify invading Iraq. And after the U.S. invasion and occupation, he became Vice President Dick Cheney's Middle East adviser.

The neoconservative plan for invading Iraq reflected Wurmser's assumption that the United States would not need to plan a long military occupation because toppling Hussein's regime would unlock the power of the Iraqi Shiites.

But the political realities in Iraq were nothing like Wurmser and his allies imagined them. They had not counted on the Sunnis mounting an effective resistance instead of rolling over. Nor had they anticipated that Shiite clerics of Iraq would demand national elections and throw their support behind the militant Shiite parties—the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and the Dawa Party—which had returned from exile in Iran in the wake of the U.S. overthrow of Hussein.

SCIRI and Dawa were not what the hardliners had in mind when they thought about Shiite power in Iraq. Their paramilitary formations had been created, trained,

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and nurtured by Iran's Revolutionary Guards, and their views on international politics were not known to be distinguishable from those of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The neoconservatives also knew that Dawa was a terrorist organization. Its operatives were behind the bombing of the U.S. and French embassies in Kuwait in 1983 in an effort to drive the United States out of the country. (One of the Shiites elected to the Iraqi parliament in December 2005, Jamal Jaafar Mohammed, was said by the U.S. Embassy spokesman in early February to be under investigation for his participation in that bombing.)

When critics of Ahmed Chalabi, a close ally of the neo-conservatives and head of the exile group the Iraqi National Congress, accused him of having spied for Iran, and when the National Security Council wrote a policy paper called "Marginalizing Chalabi," neoconservatives outside the government were livid. Michael Ledeen wrote a May 28, 2004, column in the National Review Online pointing out that Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, the head of SCIRI, and Ibrahim Jaffari, of the Dawa Party, were still on the Iranian payroll, but were nevertheless in Washington's "good graces."

Meanwhile, the AEI's Michael Rubin began warning in spring 2004 that Iran was consolidating its influence in Shiite southern Iraq by funneling large amounts of money into support for its Iraqi clients.

But Wolfowitz, Feith, and Wurmser, faced with a rising tide of Sunni armed resistance, had already decided that they had to accept the pro-Iranian groups as temporary allies against the Sunnis. When Wolfowitz testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on May 18, 2004, he suggested that the Bush administration had accepted the continued existence of these Shiite militias,

as long as they remained friendly to the United States. As to disarming them, he said, "That is not part of the mission unless it is necessary to bring them under control." Once the United States had been able to build an "alternative security institution," he said, "then the militias can go away."

The war planners in the Bush administration had also decided that the militant Shiites would get their election in January 2005, which meant that a Shiite government would be formed later that year. With those decisions, the descent of Iraq into sectarian civil war became unavoidable.

Throughout 2004 and the first half of 2005, the Shiite militias took advantage of the supportive policy of the United States to consolidate their power in Baghdad and began terrorizing Sunni communities. After the government formed under the Dawa Party's Ibrahim Jaffari, the Shiite Badr Brigade moved into the Ministry of Interior, which became a vehicle for state terror. Despite media coverage of Shiite death squads operating freely in the capital, the Bush administration refused to admit that there was any problem with Shiite militias.

Only in October 2005, after what must have been a fierce internal struggle in Washington, did the U.S. Embassy begin to oppose the Shiite effort to force Sunnis out of Baghdad. But by then it was far too late. The genie of sectarian civil war could not be put back in the bottle.

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