

# Italy Wakes Up to Iraq 'Post-War' War Reality

by Claudio Celani

The Nov. 12 suicide attack against the Italian *Carabinieri* police force headquarters in Nassiriya, southern Iraq, which killed 33 (19 Italians and 14 Iraqis) and destroyed part of the compound, not only resulted in destruction of innocent lives, but blew up the fundamental ambiguity behind the Italian military deployment in Iraq. Italy had sent a contingent of 2,700 to Iraq, under U.S. request, after President Bush had announced, "Major combat is over." Italians knew that this was a fiction, but everyone hoped that, by deploying the Italian contingent in southern Iraq, among traditionally anti-Saddam Shi'ite populations, it would be immune from guerrilla or terrorist attacks.

The Italian troops settled in Nassiriya, built a hospital, started to rebuild roads, electricity, water supplies, etc. The *Carabinieri*, a professional police force, had established its headquarters in the center of the city, started to train a local police force, and established relationships with local clan leaders, hoping to replay a successful model of "peace-keeping" operations already applied in countless missions. The illusion was that Italians would be spared the guerrilla and terrorist attacks which the Americans were suffering in the North. This fiction is now broken, with the consequence that behind the resolute public declarations, the Berlusconi government has already started to study the possibility of a face-saving exit from the Iraqi quagmire.

## After the Moment of National Unity

The popular reaction in Italy to the Nassiriya bombing has so far been "patriotic," also thanks to a sapient propaganda machine; opposition forces have avoided open fire on the government in the name of "national unity" in the moment of sorrow. But when the dust has settled, the issue will be: We were told the war was over, and it goes on; get our soldiers out of there quickly, or the government will be the next victim. Italian Premier Silvio Berlusconi knows this, especially as he faces a government crisis in January whose outcome, in his plans, could be early elections. A scenario of repeated, bloody attacks against the Italian contingent in Iraq will evaporate his hopes of winning the domestic showdown.

For the American government this means that Washington is losing allies in the occupation of Iraq. Immediately after the Nassiriya suicide attack, the Japanese government postponed its decision to send a military contingent to Iraq. On Nov. 13, Italian State President Carlo Azeglio Ciampi

**Dossier del 18 novembre  
2003**



**Presentazione**

**Il testo del messaggio del  
Presidente del Consiglio  
(12 novembre 2003)**

*The half-staff flag on the Italian government's website announced Prime Minister Berlusconi's message to the nation on the loss of 19 Italian Carabinieri, with 14 Iraqis, in the Nov. 12 Nassiriyah bombing. The solemn moment of national unity hides unrest.*

arrived in the United States for a scheduled visit, including meetings with George W. Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of State Powell, and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. Ciampi met Bush immediately after the meeting of the National Security Council with U.S. occupation chief Paul Bremer, which had just decided the "change of strategy" on Iraq. Ciampi delivered a clear message: "Unilateral ways are an unsatisfactory answer to the big questions of the 21st Century," he said, adding that "a multilateral system is indispensable to successfully deal with challenges and crises."

Meanwhile in Italy, the government, through Defense Minister Martino, was facing Parliament with a report on the Nassiriyah attack. Most members applauded his report, but several interventions from the opposition Deputies and Senators indicated that soon, a political storm would break out on the reasons for the Italian presence in Iraq. Former Premier Massimo D'Alema, speaking for the largest opposition party, the Social Democrats, recalled that the government had made a mistake in supporting the war on Iraq. Another former prime minister, Giulio Andreotti, a moderate and a long-time friend of the United States, declared polemically: "I do not know whether it is right to define it as 'post-war' and I do not know whether the war has ever ended. Let aside, then, whether it should have been started or not." Andreotti proposed to form a parliamentary delegation for a mission to Iraq, to "try to understand" the situation there. "I also believe that it is unjust to speak, from a general standpoint, of liberation of Iraq. Sure, nobody wants Saddam Hussein back; but the country is deeply divided."

Later, the government chose to ride the tide of "patriotism" with a parody of the Bush phrase, "Whoever is not with us, is against us," after 9/11. "This is our Sept. 11," Martino

said in Nassiriyah, announcing that "We will not leave Iraq," and swearing that "Italy will not cease playing its part in the war on terrorism." Martino and others in the government praised the Italian population's impressive mass demonstrations of support to the *Carabinieri*, while popular TV talk-shows announced that "Italy has gotten back its national identity."

In reality, the apparent unity around the government "looks very much similar to those lulls preceding sea storms," in the words of a commentator from the daily *Corriere della Sera*. Circles in the Italian establishment which have been traditionally pro-American have started to raise questions. Sergio Romano, a former ambassador and a columnist in *Corriere*, wrote that America's allies in Iraq "cannot leave because it would be an undecorous gesture and it would be interpreted as a betrayal. But they start to ask the question whether their ally does have, what in American political jargon is called an 'exit strategy'."

### **'We Should Have Expected All This'**

Inevitably, Italian military leaders are angry at the consequences of bad political choices, for which they are paying with their lives. Despite the climate of national sorrow, they have complained that, outside of their zone in Iraq, they receive scarce or non-existent intelligence. There is no direct intelligence flow between the American and the Italian headquarters in Iraq, as reports go first from Baghdad to Washington, then to Rome, then eventually back to southern Iraq. Since the four suicide bombers in Nassiriyah came from outside, such intelligence is vital to prevent similar attacks.

Franco Angioni is a veteran Army officer who commanded several peace-keeping missions, including the UN mission in Beirut 1982-84. He is today a member of Parliament and still a prestigious military figure. He speaks also for active duty officers who, for obvious reasons, cannot speak out. A suicide attack, Angioni said, "cannot be stopped other than with a prevention policy. And here, in my opinion, intelligence is failing completely. In Beirut, we had two levels of intelligence: a strategic and a tactical one. Sure, we had more time to organize our information network, but when we learned that somebody had stolen some M13s from the Lebanese army and had painted them white, with our flags, then we understood we were target of a suicide attack. Then, when we learned that a load of exogenous explosive had left Czechoslovakia, we put the puzzle together. We calculated the range of the explosive and we built our defenses. In Iraq, instead . . . those who collaborate are considered to be traitors."

Angioni concluded: "Today we pay the price of a wrong policy, because we lined up passively with the occupation troops. We should have expected all this."

In Nassiriyah, while the Italian militaries were moving their headquarters out of the city to the desert in fear of future suicide bombers, an Italian official in the U.S.-led Coalition

Provisional authority, special counselor Marco Calamai in the southern province of Dhi Qar, resigned, accusing Paul Bremer's administration of inefficiency and failing to understand Iraq.

Speaking to Italian reporters, Calamai complained that the British and Americans had marginalized the Italians: "They don't consult us, they don't involve us." Calamai said only an interim authority headed by the United Nations could turn things around. Calamai told Italian reporters in Nassiriya that the failure of the coalition to understand Iraqi society had created "delusion, social discontent and anger" among Iraqis and allowed terrorism to "easily take root." He said about \$400,000 a month was supposed to be made available for projects in Dhi Qar province alone, but "because of the muddled organization of [the coalition], only a fraction has been spent. The provisional authority simply doesn't work," Calamai said, adding that only a UN administration could turn the tide.

Some political forces, especially those to the left, are starting to call on the government to immediately withdraw Italian troops from Nassiriya. A more articulated proposal came from moderate opposition leaders, who call on the government to convene a meeting of the European Union Council of Ministers to discuss a general European initiative for Iraq. The Italian government, as interim chairman of the EU Council, could launch such an initiative, whose elements should be: immediate formation of a real Iraqi government including representatives of all political and social forces; replacement of Anglo-American occupation troops with an international coalition under UN flag; involvement of neighboring countries in the peace process; and reconstruction aid.

Such a policy offers no guarantee for success, but the current one does not have a chance. The Vatican Nuncio in Baghdad, Msgr. Fernando Filoni, expressed the dilemma in an interview Nov. 20: "There are now two dangers," Filoni said. "One danger is to say: Let us all get out of here and leave them alone. This would produce a terrible crisis, impossible to face, because all state powers have been cancelled and nothing more would be left, only chaos. The second danger would be to impose perspectives and solutions which Iraqis do not feel as their own. . . . The Iraqis need to feel an authority of theirs which is present, somebody who speaks and indicates a road, some perspectives. We need a leadership, a leader who speak as an Iraqi to the Iraqis."

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