

Shades of 1920:¹ Occupiers Now See the Real Iraqi Resistance

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

All eyes were on New York on Jan. 19, as leading members of the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), U.S. proconsul in Iraq Paul Bremer, and his British counterpart Jeremy Greenstock met with UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, in an effort to push through a formula for an orderly “transfer” of sovereignty from the occupying powers in Iraq, to a newly constituted “sovereign” transitional government. But as the UN leader, the occupiers, and IGC members Adnan Pachachi, Ahmed Chalabi and Abdel Aziz al-Hakim convened around a table, the real decision-makers made a massive display of power in the streets of Baghdad. Up to 1 million people marched in protest against the “transfer” plan on that New York agenda. Nothing encapsulates the dilemma of U.S.-U.K. policy in Iraq better, than the juxtaposition of these two gatherings.

Although Western press accounts radically underreported the size and composition of the Baghdad demonstration, eyewitness accounts, illustrated by live coverage on Arab and Farsi media outlets, documented that not “tens of thousands,” nor “up to 100,000,” but a million Iraqis were involved. The mass mobilization, characterized in Western reports as organized by “the Shi’ites,” in fact involved Iraqis of all ethnic, religious, and political groupings. Live film footage and regional experts agree, that there were Sunni and Shi’ite Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, and at least two Arab Christian groups. Demonstrators included followers of radical Shi’ite Mukhtar al-Sadr, who were seen carrying pictures of Ayatollah Ali al-Husseini al-Sistani, the highest religious Shi’ite authority. Other portraits visible were those of Imam Ali, Ayatollah Mohammed Bakir al-Hakim, and Jesus Christ, revered as a prophet in Islam.

Two U.S. military helicopters circled overhead, while the

masses of women and children, students, professionals, doctors, engineers, teachers, unemployed, etc. marched for six hours through Baghdad to the historic Mustansiriyah University. Security for the march was organized by the Al-Badr Brigades (the militia of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, SCIRI), and there were no reported incidents of violence. American troops wisely stayed away. The Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), supposedly “representative” of the people, was conspicuous by its absence.

‘This Is Only the Beginning’

The demonstrators chanted, “No, no to America!”; “Yes, yes to Sistani!”; “Yes to Hawza!” (the theological center in Najaf); “No foreign leaders!”; and “Yes to elections!” The massive show of force was intended as a protest against the talks at the UN. A day earlier, on Jan. 15, an estimated 35,000 Shi’ites had demonstrated in the southern city of Basra, in support of Ayatollah al-Sistani and his demand that elections be held to elect a parliament and government. With “No to America!” and “Yes to Al-Sistani!” they shouted down Bremer’s plan for regional caucuses to select a legislature, which would, in turn, name a transitional government. One demonstrator was quoting, “We are here to support Sistani’s edict to avoid an appointed council laying down our constitution. If that happens, we will resist.”

But it was the Baghdad march which really shifted the correlation of forces in Iraq. For in the capital city, it was not only Shi’ite followers of al-Sistani, but representative layers of the entire population who hailed him as their figurehead in the struggle for national unity, independence, and sovereignty. The ayatollah from Najaf is known as the “conscience of the people,” and it is acknowledged that no one dares to contest him. As one Lebanese analyst told *EIR*, “Al-Sistani does not represent the Shi’ites, he represents a national movement, which includes Sunnis, Kurds, Turkmen, the whole

1. See “Lessons To Be Learned: Iraqi Resistance to British Occupation 80 Years Ago,” *EIR*, Nov. 14, 2003.



The scope and seriousness of the Iraqi pro-elections resistance led by Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani (right) became clear in mid-January, when marches brought out a million Iraqis. The Bush Administration and U.S. proconsul Paul Bremer quickly turned for help to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan—who may not be able to accomplish it.

population. This is the beginning. If the U.S. does not back down and allow elections, this will lead to ‘al Jihad’ and that will be the end of Mr. Bush and the Americans.”

In point of fact, al-Sistani can transform the political protest into active political (and, eventually, military) resistance against the occupation. Although he does not hold any political office, as supreme religious authority for all Shi’ites, al-Sistani can issue a religious edict, or *fatwa*, declaring the IGC, for example, illegitimate; or, a *fatwa* saying that any legislature, constituent assembly, or government selected other than by general free and fair elections, were illegitimate. Two of the ayatollah’s representatives announced this possibility, during the Basra demonstrations. His representative in Basra, Ali al-Mussawi stated, “The large crowd before you today are expressing their feeling that they don’t want anything imposed on them. We want to affirm our rights. We want elections in all political domains.” The ayatollah’s representative in Kuwait was more explicit. Speaking on Abu Dhabi television, Mohammed Baqir al-Mehri said: “If Bremer rejects the opinion of the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, then he will issue a *fatwa* to deprive the elected council of its legitimacy. Then the Iraqi people will not obey this council, which we call a council made of paper and a U.S.-elected council.”

At the same time, Hojat al-Islam Ali Abdulkhakim al-Safi, who is the second most senior Shi’a cleric in Iraq and a close aide of Ayatollah Sistani, sent a letter to President Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair, rejecting the argument that early elections were not feasible as a pretext to deny Iraqis their legitimate aspirations. Mideast press reported that the letter

said: “We know that the mere fact of your favoring the appointment over elections is an indication to what you see as a threat to your interests . . . and a deliberate marginalization of the majority. . . . Your plan for the transfer of powers is vague and too complicated. . . . It is nothing other than replacing one dictatorship with another to serve your own re-election goals.” The letter concludes with a warning that the two countries would drag their countries into a battle they would lose, if they did not let Iraqis choose their own institutions. This is a clear warning that the Shi’ites could join the armed resistance.

Other Shi’ite personalities speaking indirectly for al-Sistani, have issued warnings of what could happen if Bremer continues intransigent. Sheikh Abdel Mahdi al-Karbalai said on Jan. 16, “In the coming days and months, we’re going to see protests and strikes and civil disobedience and *perhaps*

confrontations with the occupying force if it insists on its colonial and diabolical plans to design the country’s politics for its own interests. We tell you to support the *marja’s* (Sistani’s) call for general elections. The *marja* will do all in his power to stop those who would throw away the rights of the Iraqi people, and will not give up its cause.” (The term *marja at-taqlid*, source of emulation, refers to the elite of the clerics, headed by al-Sistani.) Al-Karbalai continued: “In these closed-door meetings, they (the Americans) want to decide the political, social, economic, and even geographical future of Iraq for their own benefit. I guarantee you that the *marja* is determined to continue his battle until the end. You must support this (struggle) because if you do not . . . you will know the anger and curse of God.”

Karbalai laid out what he said was the perspective defined by al-Sistani: “A huge section of the Iraqi people and the Shi’ites asked the *marja* to take a position and he has recommended to them to keep the peace. But the *marja* will lift this order if he finds himself at an impasse with the occupying power on the negotiations over the country’s future. We have not yet reached an impasse, but we must prepare the Iraqi people psychologically to support the *marja*, because we do not know what will happen these next three or four months, but it will be decisive. The *marja’s* actions will be progressive: We will begin perhaps first with mass protests, then move on to a civil disobedience campaign, and then finally a general strike.”

On Friday, Jan. 16, thousands gathered for prayers in Najaf, as al-Sistani met tribal leaders to discuss his opposition to U.S. plans for transferring power to Iraqis; they too

Ayatollah al-Sistani

When President George W. Bush promised “free democratic elections” in his State of the Union address on Jan. 20, he was certainly not thinking of Iraq. But the de facto leader of that country, Ayatollah al-Husseini al-Sistani, is committed precisely to implementing democracy.

The 73-year-old Ayatollah al-Sistani is a *Seyyed*, that is, a descendant of the Imam Hussein and the Prophet Mohammed. His family has its roots in Sistan, an eastern region of neighboring Iran. In 1949, he began his theological studies at the religious center Qom, in Iran; and then from 1952 in the Shi’ite holy city of Najaf, Iraq, where he has lived ever since. Al-Sistani is recognized now as the highest authority for Shi’ites; he is known as a *marja*, which means “source of emulation.”

In the 1920s Iraqi resistance against the British, it was a similar religious figure, Sheikh Mohammed Taiq al-Shirazi, who emerged as the leader of the national struggle for independence. Al-Sistani has the authority to issue a *fatwa*, or religious edict, which would be binding on all Shi’ites. Initially, as the U.S.-led war started, al-Sistani ordered restraint, telling Iraqis not to engage in active resistance against the occupying forces. But if the United States does not fulfill his demands for true, national elections, this will change; total national resistance would be only one *fatwa* away.

expressed their support for him. That same day, another of al-Sistani’s aides told *Reuters* television there was still time to find a compromise, and that people would continue to stage peaceful demonstrations to show their opposition to the U.S. plan.

Al-Sistani himself has been cautious in his public statements, hinting merely that if the deadlock is not broken, the security situation could worsen. But the direction of developments is clear.

Resistance Is Not Sectarian

Ostensibly, the conflict between the Iraqis led by al-Sistani, and the occupying powers, revolves around the modality of setting up a government which would be given “sovereignty” by June 30, 2004. The plan drafted by Bremer, and agreed to by the IGC last Nov. 15, foresees the selection of a national assembly or parliament, then a government, through caucuses in 18 provinces. Al-Sistani, on the other hand, is demanding free elections. Western press reports claim the ayatollah’s position is dictated by raw power politics—i.e.,

that he fears regional caucuses would deprive him of a Shi’ite majority in elected bodies, reflecting the 60% majority that Shi’ite Arabs represent in the population. In reality, it is more than a sectarian question. As the enormous support from all layers of the population in Baghdad illustrated, the Iraqi people demand authentic democracy and sovereignty—an end to the occupation.

This is what Washington and London fear. Thus their argument that there is “not enough time” to organize elections before the scheduled transfer of power.

The former Iraqi ambassador to the UN, Mohammed al-Douri, laid out the bare truth in a statement to *AP* on Jan. 17. “For me, what is important is Iraq,” he said, “not the majority or the minority. I’ll accept anyone who is elected—a Shi’ite or even a Kurd, if that is the people’s choice. The important thing is that the (Iraqi) people elect, and not have individuals appointed by foreign entities like the United States.” Al-Douri explained: “Elections pose a big threat to the future of America’s presence in Iraq, and the Americans sense this.” The United States “fears that Iraqis would elect people who are against the American presence in Iraq.”

American plans, in fact, foresee a post-transfer “invitation” by the new Quisling government to the occupying powers, to maintain their occupation under the guise of a “friendly” military presence.

Can The UN Mediate?

Between a rock and a hard place, the Bush Administration is seeking Kofi Annan’s UN help to extricate itself from the dilemma. During the Jan. 19 talks in New York, Bremer called on Annan to send a delegation to Iraq, to “explore” the feasibility of organizing elections within the pre-established timeframe. Bremer is gambling that such a delegation, on technical grounds, would rule out the possibility of organizing a vote; and that al-Sistani would accept such a verdict from the UN. In essence, Bremer is asking the UN to mediate between the occupying powers and al-Sistani. Annan has stated that he would consider sending a delegation, but would “insist on our independence and neutrality, and that both sides accept our judgment.” The Secretary General’s prime concern, he has reiterated, is that the security situation is not such as to permit the presence of the UN, which would be required for organizing elections.

According to the collaborators in the IGC, if a delegation goes, it will also seek some “alternative” to elections. “We should not stick to rigid positions on these matters,” said Iraqi Governing Council President Adnan Pachachi, who attended the UN meeting. “We’ve got to find ways and means to deal with problems as they arise..”

The next weeks will be decisive in determining the future of Iraq. The national movement spearheaded by al-Sistani does not necessarily want to see an escalation to military confrontation, but it is committed to satisfying Iraqis’ just demands for independence, sovereignty and democracy. It will not capitulate.