

Iraq faces civil war and sectarian partition

By Julie Hyland
5 August 2006

Iraq is sliding into civil war and sectarian partition. That is the view of leading personnel in the British foreign service, the US military and the government of Iraq itself.

A leaked diplomatic brief from William Patey, Britain's outgoing ambassador to Iraq, revealed his assessment that the country was more likely to descend into civil war and sectarian division than evolve into the stable democracy claimed by Prime Minister Tony Blair and US President George Bush.

Extracts from the brief, which was sent to Blair, senior government officials and military commanders in Iraq and Afghanistan, were published by the BBC. In it Patey warns that "the prospect of a low intensity civil war and a de facto division of Iraq is probably more likely at this stage than a successful and substantial transition to a stable democracy.

"Even the lowered expectation of President Bush for Iraq—a government that can sustain itself, defend itself and govern itself and is an ally in the war on terror—must remain in doubt."

Patey's brief was intended as friendly advice to the government. But it flatly contradicts the efforts by London and Washington to dismiss concerns over the extreme dangers facing not merely by US and British troops, but by the Iraqi people as a result of the invasion of their country.

In his speech to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council earlier this week, Blair claimed that the invasion of Iraq was crucial for ensuring global security and in helping moves "towards democracy in the Arab world."

Patey's memo warns of the growing resistance faced by the occupation forces in Iraq. The major priority now is to prevent militia organizations, such as the Mahdi Army led by the Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, becoming "a state within a state, as Hezbollah has done in Lebanon," he cautions. This requires the more effective use of Iraqi troops as British forces are unable to "confront the militias alone."

Referring to British and US claims of an early "handover" to Iraqi security forces, the dispatch states that "too much talk of an early exit from Iraq" will only "weaken our position."

Hours after the brief was leaked, Patey's assessment was validated by two senior US generals.

Questioned on their response to Patey's views by the US Senate Armed Services Committee, General John Abizaid, the leading US commander in the Middle East, said, "I believe that the sectarian violence is probably as bad as I have seen it in Baghdad in particular, and that if not stopped, it is possible Iraq could move towards civil war."

General Peter Pace, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, concurred, stating, "We do have the possibility of that devolving into civil war."

Especially since the bombing of the Shiite Al-Askariya mosque in February, sectarian violence has escalated. An average of 100 Iraqis per day are now estimated to be killed in bombings and shootings and 40 are kidnapped daily.

In March, Iraq's former prime minister, Iyad Allawi, said, "We are losing each day as an average 50 to 60 people throughout the country, if not more. If this is not civil war, then God knows what civil war is."

Iraq was moving towards a "point of no return," he continued, when the country would inevitably fragment. "It will not only fall apart but sectarianism will spread through the region, and even Europe and the US will not be spared the violence that results."

At his monthly press conference Thursday, Blair attempted to ward off questions on Patey's memo, telling reporters, "However difficult it is, [we must] stay the course."

But there is no question that a civil war is already under way. Moreover, it is not simply the unintended or unforeseen consequence of the invasion.

In its efforts to stamp out resistance to its illegal occupation of the country, the US has consciously pursued a "divide and rule" strategy, promoting Kurdish and Shiite organizations at the expense of Sunni Arabs.

Much of the US-recruited Iraqi army is drawn from Kurdish nationalists and Shiite fundamentalists who are being employed to suppress the largely Sunni-based resistance movement alongside American forces. Sunni groups have launched sectarian attacks on Shiites and Shiite militias have in turn targeted the Sunni population.

The *Independent* newspaper acknowledged that "the Iraqi government ... does not really control its own armed forces,

which often take their orders from Kurdish, Sunni or Shia communal leaders. Sunni districts in Baghdad see the police and police commandos as officially sanctioned deaths squads. Shia districts say only their own militiamen can protect them from suicide bombers.”

The violence is displacing families and creating segregated ghettos, with data showing that Sunnis and other minorities are quitting the south, and Shiites leaving Baghdad and the north. According to reports, the Tigris River in Baghdad is becoming a dividing line between a Sunni west and Shiite south.

The latest figures show that tens of thousands of Iraqis have fled their homes. Last month alone, more than 30,000 people registered as refugees with the migration ministry. Some 162,000 people have registered for help in the past five months. The ministry has set up 11 tent camps for refugees, including one in the southern city of Diwaniya where 10,000 Shiite refugees had taken up residence.

The “national unity” government headed by Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki is based on an unstable alliance between Kurdish nationalists, Shiite sectarian parties and some Sunni organizations, whilst the US-sponsored constitution allows for the de facto partition into a Kurdish north and a Shiite south. Not only does this exclude Sunnis from any share in the oil-rich areas, it means that the various parties have a vested interest in fortifying their control by enforcing communal divisions.

According to the *Independent*, a senior Iraqi government official has said “Iraq as a political project is finished” and that “the parties have moved to plan B.”

The official told the newspaper “that the Shia, Sunni and Kurdish parties were now looking at ways to divide Iraq between them and to decide the future of Baghdad, where there is a mixed population. ‘There is serious talk of Baghdad being divided into [Shia] east and [Sunni] west,’ he said.”

On August 1, Iraq’s vice president, Adel Abd al-Mahdi, said that the Shia Iraqi Coalition, the largest parliamentary bloc, intended to raise the issue of a Shia federal state, stretching from Babylon, 100 kilometres south of Baghdad, to Basra.

“Federalism is constitutionally secured. We have to work seriously on this issue, and figure out the necessary mechanism to switch to federalism,” he said.

In addition, ongoing US efforts to suppress resistance to its occupation have contributed to an upsurge in the violence.

In June, Maliki announced “Operation Forward Together,” aimed at “pacifying” Baghdad. Some 4,000 US troops have been redeployed to the capital to participate in a 75,000-strong force enforcing roadblocks, curfews and

house raids in an effort to shore up the Maliki government, which has little legitimacy, let alone control.

Both Patey’s comments and those of the US generals indicate that the US and Britain intend to step up such repression. Certainly the singling out of the Mahdi army for confrontation indicates a further clampdown against the majority Shiite population in the south.

Having failed to extinguish opposition to the occupation, there is a growing chorus of leading policy advisers who are positively advocating the division of the country. Some of these have long favoured such a scenario, as it would enable the US to concentrate on securing the country’s oilfields.

Patey’s remarks are almost identical to those of Peter Galbraith, former US ambassador to Croatia, who wrote in the *New York Review of Books* in May 2004, “Civil war and the break-up of Iraq are more likely outcomes than a successful transition to a pluralistic Western-style democracy.”

Galbraith, writing under the heading “How to get out of Iraq,” was positively advocating such a scenario. As someone who played an integral role in the division of the Balkans into competing, ethnically based western protectorates, his latest book, *The End of Iraq*, argues for the partition of the country into separate Kurdish, Sunni and Shiite areas as the “only route to peace.”

Daniel Pipes, the director of the neo-conservative Middle East Forum, has also endorsed civil war in Iraq, arguing that it would be a strategic advantage to the US because it would “reduce coalition casualties” as Iraqis “fight each other.”

Such suggestions are as reckless as they are absurd. Not only would it be a disaster for Iraq itself, the civil war and ethnic cleansing necessary to accomplish it would inevitably presage a broader military conflagration across the Middle East and beyond.

But from Afghanistan, to Iraq and now Lebanon, Washington and London have demonstrated their indifference to the plight of the Arab masses. Motivated solely by the drive to establish hegemony over the strategic geopolitical resources of the Middle East, the imperialist powers have set into motion processes that guarantee instability and breakdown.

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