

Iraq: Proposal For Change

By Ghassan Salamé

The following is the text of the keynote speech by Ghassan Salamé at the Oil & Money Conference held in London on 4 November and sponsored by Energy Intelligence and The International Herald Tribune. Dr Salamé is Professor of International Relations at the Institut d' Etudes Politiques in Paris and former Senior Political Adviser to the UN Special Representative in Iraq, Sergio Vieira de Mello, and Lebanon's Minister of Culture. Dr Salamé spoke in his personal capacity.

A month ago, many Arab newspapers carried, front page, the photograph of *Bremer Imperator*: Iraq's US Civil Administrator was sitting alone, on a sort of 3ms-high throne, watching the graduation of the first batch of (750) Iraqi soldiers. Many in the Middle East interpreted it as the Viceroy looking down in satisfaction at his praetorian guard. Others, the same day, noted that the beginning of the new school year was announced, not by the newly appointed Iraqi minister of education but by his US advisor. Meanwhile, in a characteristically sweeping sentence, a *New York Times* columnist was telling his readers that the US was giving \$87bn for "Iraq reconstruction", pretending to forget that most of that amount would be devoted to military occupation purposes. Hence the conclusion: Who provides the money, rules. If Congress gives the money, if the Iraqis accept the *fait accompli*, if other countries are willing to join the US even in limited numbers, why bother lobbying in the UN or begging in Madrid? With a bit of luck, with (more and) more US funds and a modest amount of patience, US unilateral handling of Iraq may, after all, work. Direct military occupation and direct financial disbursements naturally lead to direct political rule.

The US is apparently set to stay the course, less out of conviction than because of the potentially huge political costs of a turnabout. On the ground, nobody should underestimate the Coalition's will to succeed. It is basically the only working machine in town and the whole political process revolves around it.

The Coalition is operating from a *tabula rasa*: it buried General Garner's cautious decisions as well as the State Department's pre-war plans. It ordered the deconstruction of the Iraqi state as if the latter had been a mere disguise for Saddam's personal rule: exit the regular army; exit the national police; exit around 40,000 civil servants of some (often only formally) high-ranking people in the Ba'ath Party; and exit full provincial bureaucracies. The Coalition is intent on creating a new Iraq of its own; and one should not ignore the dimensions of that truly imperial ambition. This policy is supported by those Iraqis who see this 'purification' drive as a precondition for their push to fill the state apparatus with their own people, which they are slowly doing. The fear in Iraq is that the transition underway is less one from dictatorship to democracy than a transition from a Ba'athist-ruled Iraq to a yet-to-be defined new hegemony of some other group. In this master plan, the Coalition defines a concrete role for each and everyone: the Governing Council should do this, the ministers that, the clerics, the US military, the UN, etc. Actors are given specific tasks to achieve.

The Coalition is not deprived of strong assets, and people should think twice before condemning the endeavor as doomed:

- The US is militarily occupying Iraq and therefore is the single unifying force in a disarticulated land. Most Iraqis, even the harshest critics I know of the US occupation, consider a sudden military withdrawal as a nightmare: not that they fear Saddam's return to power as it is sometimes written, but, with the complete deconstruction of the state apparatus and the rising sectarianism, they fear, with some reason, an inevitable era of complete chaos. The state deconstruction is such that many Iraqi *cognoscenti* are fond of thinking that chaos has been created intentionally to help legitimize a long military occupation. The mention of a sudden

US military withdrawal induces panic on the face of any Iraqi you talk to: remember the looting that followed Saddam's collapse and you understand what people fear if told of a sudden US withdrawal.

- The US is providing the money to reconstruct Iraq: although the overheads are terribly high, the US is giving a strong signal of its readiness to pay the rent for its occupation of the land and loudly, using the fact as an argument of last resort to justify its direct rule. With the Madrid donors conference mixed results, this argument becomes even more compelling.
- Despite episodic innuendos about a possible scapegoating, one is really impressed by the amount of support Ambassador Bremer has gathered in Washington. He is smart, energetically dedicated, well traveled and charming, at least when he is patient enough to play that tune. Although he certainly was not versed in things Iraqi, he learns rapidly and makes up his mind quickly (sometimes with negative effects he tries painfully to correct later).
- Set for a direct rule, the Coalition takes a huge advantage from the well organized diffusion of (the very small amount of) power left with the Iraqis: Governing Council (GC) heavyweights are infuriated by the CPA's manipulation of the 'independents' in the GC or of the interim ministers, ie those who have no power base of their own. Moreover, provincial governors are dealing directly with the local US or British military commanders without even informing the so-called 'national' politicians in Baghdad of their acts. Some of these governors have even signed agreements with neighboring countries. Here is the *tabula rasa* at its apex.
- One other asset is the very uncertainty of the approach. Iraqis keep asking us and themselves: what do the Americans want? This is somehow transforming most Iraqis into passive observers of Bremer's magical talents, with the exception of those who have already decided that this was a common, too obvious, occupation of their country and that it needs to be resisted by force.

So here we are: you can hardly work WITH the Coalition: you have to work FOR it (and be rapidly overworked as so many American aides have been), AGAINST it (and sustain Washington's furor) or forget Iraq as long as the CPA is, the single ruler, with, by some measures, much more power than Saddam ever had. The US has chosen direct rule as a principle and Ambassador Bremer has transformed it largely into a personal one, probably less by intent than by a gradual slide. Truly, this Promethean ambition preceded Bremer: civilians in the Pentagon had set such high, overloaded, stakes for the war in Iraq that Bremer had only to wear ready-made imperial clothes.

But direct rule also means full responsibility and the US occupation is meeting with very serious challenges. The security issue is of course paramount. US soldiers are killed in increasingly bolder, more sophisticated, better organized attacks. Iraqis, especially in the capital, are quite happy if they go back home safely after half an hour at the market. The cost is high, in dollars (some \$160 billion already committed) as well as in perception. Many Iraqis are puzzled by the contrast between the efficiency of the US war machine and the inefficiency of the US peace one. Terrorists, whose cooperation with Saddam is yet to be demonstrated by the US, are now flocking to this new open field for militant jihad. Iraqi exiles who have been supporting the invasion, have discovered with dismay, that the US is not in Iraq to deliver the country to them. More importantly, the population, so often told that it is not the target but the ultimate beneficiary of the war, is passively staying on the sidelines to see how things will evolve: it feels neither defeated nor victorious. Sectarian feelings, although less strident than some had feared, are certainly on the rise. So yes, the US is still committed and, yes, the obstacles are much more serious than expected by the hasty occupiers if not by the true connoisseurs.

What is to be done to get out of a mess that is increasingly threatening the unity of Iraq, regional stability, let alone President Bush's re-election? Ten proposals can be articulated, proposals that will be useful if and when bravado statements are replaced by a serene, rational approach to what increasingly looks like a quagmire.

1. **First, conceptually: liberate Iraq from the liberators' grand designs.** The country needs to be liberated; not yet from US military occupation, but immediately from its use as a jumping board, a strategic stronghold, a shining model, a pioneering example... you name it. The country is complex enough, has been so deeply weakened by decades of dictatorship, by successive wars and (most importantly) by 13 terrible years of sanctions, the harshness of which will be remembered by Iraqis for generations to come, and now by so many post-war management mistakes that it needs at last to be looked at in and for itself instead of being viewed as the model for democracy or the jumping board against Syria and Iran or even as the key to the settlement of the Arab-Israeli dispute and, more recently, as the second step of a planetary anti-terrorism crusade. Unless Iraq is somehow liberated from the burden of being given a role that goes beyond its own borders, it will remain the victim of what the US normally had criticized Saddam for: using the country for some grandiose regional purpose.
2. **Establish a truly provisional, formally sovereign, government as soon as possible.** The line taken by the US was: Karzai in post-war Afghanistan, Abu Mazin in post-intifadha-quelling Palestine, and the London group in liberated Iraq. Karzai is still there, Abu Mazin is already out, and the exile politicians were replaced by direct US rule in Iraq sometime last May. The reason for this change of heart a few weeks after victory is still unclear. Our idea is certainly not a return to the pre-Bremer process. It means giving the Iraqis what the Afghans got in Bonn: a representative interim government that deals on a contractual basis with the US, the UN and others, and leads the country, gradually, slowly, into permanent, stable, hopefully democratic institutions. Although observers of the Afghan scene lament the lack of determination in Kabul for an enlargement of the government's political basis there and sometimes call for a second Bonn conference to ensure that this enlargement is imposed on the Northern Alliance's strongmen, it is still a more acceptable model to start with than either the past May formula of an exiles-dominated government or the present US direct rule.
3. **Move to rapid transformation from the occupation legal status into a UN mandated multinational force.** This force can be commanded, in the first period by the US; even France does not oppose such a move. National contingents, including from countries who had opposed the war, would be allocated peacekeeping missions in the various provinces under Security Council supervision. A coordinated effort to gradually hand over security to the Iraqis would follow a clearly defined timetable.
4. **Go slowly on the political process:** keep it alive without undue haste, multiply fora and seminars where people express their views and proposals; reach out to the various sectors of the population, including those who feel excluded or have excluded themselves from the new equation. Never give the impression that you are imposing the content or even the tempo of the constitution-drafting process. We should stop considering Iraqis as unaware and ignorant of what democracy means: they know what it is but they are generally skeptical about its feasibility *hic et nunc*. And they may well be right. Start writing a constitution and positions will be frozen and divisions will multiply. Think of elections and you will be faced with more chaos or, at least, a large, de-legitimizing, boycott. Forces intent on disrupting a referendum or an election need not be huge and there is enough anti-US motivation in Iraq if not to win a guerrilla war, certainly to disrupt quiet institution building. Institution building needs, therefore, to be clearly and determinedly decoupled from the security agenda, and left to the Iraqis themselves, following a slow, rational tempo of its own.
5. Conspiracy theories, and Middle Easterners are fond of them, see the former minister of defense, caught and treated with a lot of deference before being crossed off the 55-man 'wanted' list by the US military in Iraq, as the next strongman for post-Bremer Iraq. Putsches are part of the local culture. But a stable Iraq cannot wait ages until the New Iraq Army is operational. A much more reasonable approach is to **reintegrate all those who joined the REGULAR army and police** (not any of those in the past regime praetorian forces or in the many secret service gangs), who are below 33 years, and have in principle not participated in the quelling of the 1991 intifada against Saddam. Most of them did not take part in the war either and have been, as institutions, denied new weapons or a vital role in the past 12 years. New recruits will be taken only to correct any sectarian balance in these institutions. You will thus avoid the growing tendency to recycle largely unreliable militias as law and order enforcers. The disbanding of the regular army and of the

national police has been by far the most serious blunder of the past six months and needs to be corrected as soon as possible

6. Establish a now possible (thanks to available files) **clear distinction** between, on the one hand, war criminals of the highest (top of the pyramid decision-makers) or lowest (the executioners) levels and, on the other hand, professionals who have joined the party for opportunistic or idealistic motivations. Put the first group before tribunals and reinstate the second, whatever their rank in the Ba'th Party or sectarian affiliation, since they happen to be the backbone of the Iraqi state. You will thus give the Iraqis a clear lesson in the difference between a faction and a neutral state apparatus and therefore correct the other very serious blunder of a sweeping, indiscriminate de-Ba'thification.
7. **Forget about the Iraqi development fund and the international monitoring board** created by Security Council resolution 1483. An Iraqi Ministry of Finance and a Central Bank, equally supported by the World Bank and IMF, would do the job. In the meantime slow down the privatization drive: Saddam's Iraq was neither Hitler's Germany in political terms nor Honecker's Germany in economic ones. The urgent need is not for sweeping privatizations of destroyed or under-equipped industries, nor even, for oil production, but for a real rule of law so that the past regime's cronyism is not replaced by a new one, although many, including some in the US Congress and in the media, would doubt that the US model of a really competitive free market is the one presently applied to companies working in Iraq.
8. **Establish a multi-billion-dollar fund for the south**, in order to make up for the fact that areas south of Baghdad have been punished by the past regime during the past 12 years and largely ignored by international donors and NGOs. It would be an Iraqi institution, of course, supported by UNDP and Unicef. It will also answer a large expectation on the part of deprived Shi'a across the country for a better life
9. Send a clear message to the Iraqis that **the international community is at last united in its approach**. No other issue has divided it as much as the Iraqi one since the end of the Cold War. Iraqis are aware of the fact and this adds to their perplexity. It is high time the US and its allies radically downsized their objectives in Iraq and ended their direct rule there; while countries who had opposed war should start looking at it as a *fait accompli* and help rebuild a united, peaceful and prosperous Iraq. Neither the Coalition nor its many critics would be happy with a chaotic, terrorism-ridden Iraq.
10. **Never forget that Iraq is not an island: engage Iraq's neighbors**. If one needs to oversimplify the present situation in Iraq, one would say: the US is in, the UN is out and the region is back. For six months, the US had a clear strategy to handle the Iraqi question single-handedly. While regional countries are deterred so that they remain passive and the UN is invited to play a legitimizing, largely ceremonial, role in rebuilding Iraq, the US will busy itself remaking Iraq as a model for democracy and a US strategic stronghold. With the UN redeploying, and the US is busy answering nagging questions on the financial burden and on the ways American (and now Iraqi) money is being spent in Iraq, the countries bordering Iraq have been meeting in Damascus to discuss the future of that country.

One should not underestimate the significance of this development. The UN did not. One important ingredient of the UN mission in Iraq was to develop a dialogue with the six countries as well as with the Arab League. The message was clear: the UN understands that Iraq's neighbors have legitimate concerns on the evolution of that country, concerns that should be properly tackled while those countries are invited to do their utmost to help to stabilize the country. One had to listen to these complaints and, at the same time, encourage those countries to develop an interest in the stabilization of Iraq, in view of their multi-secular relations with many sects, tribes or parties in Iraq.

These UN regional openings were viewed as, at best, a diversion from the main task, at worse an unwelcome consideration of the potential contribution of Iraq's neighbors. The US basically considered Iraq as an island it could reshape independently, and when others objected, they were threatened with punishment for an unacceptable "interference". Although the US had a point in raising the issue, it was naïve in thinking that mere de-

terrence could be sufficient to solve these and other problems. This policy was even less sustainable at a moment when the US proved unable to monitor efficiently Iraq's borders, a formidable task at a moment when these troops were mainly busy trying to catch the past regime's officials or quell the nascent resistance movement to their presence.

This was a real paradox: you cannot threaten the region's countries with regime change and then expect them to be passive, let alone cooperative in your efforts to stabilize Iraq. How many US officials were saying, before the war started, that the objective was to reshape the region as a whole? That Iraq was only the beginning, soon to be followed by others such as Iran, Syria or Saudi Arabia? The regime change saga had put Iraq's neighbors on the defensive, throwing themselves into Washington's arms or making small gestures to appease Washington, waiting for the moment when the US would become more realistic in its appraisal of the costs and benefits of a sweeping regime change across the Middle East. Leaders were of course encouraged by the mounting opposition to the US occupation in Iraq (and some of them certainly encouraged it, by words if not always by deeds) as well as by the continuing transatlantic divisions over Iraq. Leaders had also to tackle the fact that the occupying force in Iraq was Israel's main ally and that Sharon had strong friends in Washington. The combination of the Iraqi issue with the Palestinian one was not lost on Arabs, leaders and oppositions alike, and this certainly did not encourage them to be helpful in Iraq.

The unsustainability of that policy gradually became evident: US commanders in the north were allowing local merchants to establish trade relations with Syria and Turkey; the US government was now asking the Saudis and other Gulf states to contribute financially to the rebuilding of Iraq. Syria was asked to cooperate in the war against terrorism and even Iran proved to be too big to be handled with gung-ho tactics, especially after its wise handling of the nuclear issue. The US seems now to develop a more realistic approach. Better late than never.

Four crucial factors are contributing to this regionalization of the Iraqi question: 1. A growing consciousness on the part of US military commanders in the field that cooperation with Iraq's neighbors is needed. 2. Disenchantment with the US is pushing various factions in and out of the Iraq's GC into seeking regional advice and help. 3. The (provisional?) settlement of the dispute between Iran and the IAEA is another factor: US officials have somehow mellowed down their rhetoric on Iran, while Tehran appears to be more cooperative on the nuclear file and possibly harsher in her treatment of al-Qa'ida and Taliban. 4. The widespread opposition to the entry of Turkish troops into Iraq has equally precipitated that regionalization trend. Even America's best friends in the GC were opposed to this intervention, either for ethnic or for sectarian reasons. The reaction among other countries was not more supportive. Most felt that Turkey's military deployment in Iraq could fuel a general trend towards regional military interference in Iraq, a form of "Lebanonization". Once a bordering country was allowed in, others would be more emboldened to do the same. In Damascus, the message is clear: Iraq is too important or too threatening to its neighbors for it to be left to the Americans alone for rebuilding.

US realists would say: why not? But realists are not those who called for the invasion of that country in the first place. The problem with Iraq is precisely that those who initiated the war wanted to be the first act in a regional reshuffle in which those whose help is now needed were supposed to be the next in line in the famous democracy crusade, with its cascade of regimes change. Shifting from those broad objectives into a policy of appeasement will not be easy for the ideologues of the Bush administration.

Reluctantly, the Coalition is correcting some of its most serious blunders, readmitting members of the old military or reintroducing known Ba'thists into the civil administration. Arming the police is now accepted. A number of public works are complete, like the rehabilitation of schools. Power distribution is not as dysfunctional as it was in the summer. All this is true. But while these signals of improvement are felt, the resistance is becoming better coordinated, more professional and much bolder. A more impatient, more critical, tune is now played by Najaf's leading clerics. More US soldiers died in the past two weeks than in the preceding three months. So yes it is a sprint competition between a US-reshaped, a US-dominated Iraq and chaos. In their heart of hearts, most Iraqis and most leaders in the Middle East would be unhappy with either of these two outcomes. Hence these 10 modest proposals are meant to devise a third way.