

America's exit strategy

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THE appointment of Pakistan's ambassador in Washington, Ashraf Jahangir Qazi, as the UN secretary-general's special representative for Iraq is more than a recognition of the eminence of one of Pakistan's top diplomats. At a time when the US is bogged down in Iraq, with constant loss of lives that does no good to President Bush's bid for a second term, there are high expectations in Washington that somehow, this appointment will provide an exit strategy for the beleaguered superpower.

Deputy secretary of state Richard Armitage has visited India and Pakistan to try to persuade them to send troops to Iraq to provide protection to a renewed UN presence that is critical to the exit strategy. Though President Musharraf has agreed to release ambassador Qazi within two weeks, it is not certain when he will be able to proceed to Baghdad, and will be obliged to start functioning from Amman, in Jordan, where the UN office for Iraq is currently located.

UN secretary-general Kofi Annan pointed out that the Security Council's resolution passed in June linked the UN's taking up the responsibilities of arranging elections, drawing up a new constitution and helping reconstruction to "circumstances" being conducive. The resolution had also called for a special force, estimated to number 4,000 soldiers to protect UN personnel and facilities. The countries approached to provide contingents included Azerbaijan, Georgia, Nepal, Pakistan and Ukraine.

Ambassador Qazi's appointment was announced two weeks after the transfer of sovereignty to an interim government. The final list from which his name emerged also included Salman Haidar, former foreign secretary of India, and Surin Pitsuwan, former foreign minister of Thailand. The names of several other candidates who were considered were withdrawn, after their families objected to the risks involved.

The element of personal risk is only one of the hazards. Given the intensity of the uprising in Iraq, attributed to the Baathists and Islamic jihadists who have entered the country, there exists a firm determination not to let the US off the hook. The US invoked the role of the UN in a bid to gain greater international support for its intervention, though the grounds cited for the pre-emption have not been established either in the US or Britain. Both Bush and Blair are coming under strong criticism for tampering with the intelligence reports to justify

resort to military action. With the election campaign in the US hotting up, and the popularity of Mr. Bush declining, the ruling party is in urgent need of some relief, in the form of lessening of insurgency, and of improvement in the overall situation in Iraq. Earlier efforts to introduce troops, even from Muslim countries, such as Turkey and Jordan, had not succeeded, and in fact the contribution in the form of troops from coalition partners has been falling. The result has been a rising number of US casualties.

With polls set for November, the Bush administration is desperately looking for signs of progress in the Middle East, to rescue its image. The US public continues to be traumatized by the 9/11 experience as the department of homeland security continues to play up evidence that the threat of terrorist attack is

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always present, and may be greater as the election approaches. However, some silver lining in Iraq is badly needed, and the renewed involvement of the UN offers the best hope.

Though the UN did not authorize the US to resort to force in Iraq, many analysts regard the world body as being a virtual tool of Washington. The destruction of the UN office in Baghdad in August 2003, in which the secretary-general's representative, Viera de Mello, was killed, reflected this attitude, and the secretary-general decided to withdraw the UN presence in Iraq, since the security of UN personnel could not be guaranteed.

Though the latest resolution of the Security Council passed in June 2004 states that the UN personnel will be stationed in Baghdad "as circumstances permit", the secretary-general will come under pressure not to postpone the deployment of the UN personnel indefinitely. Therefore, a formal approach by the US to provide troops for the security of the secretary-general's representative is only a matter of time, for only then can the UN play the role envisaged for it.

It would take a highly favourable turn of events for this exit strategy to succeed. The deep hostility towards the US, based partly on its support to Israel, and

partly on its imperial aims in the region, has to be mitigated, and such a change does not look likely under the Bush regime. Even his "Greater Middle East" plan is a thinly disguised move to impose pro-US regimes in the region, the basic strategic goals of guaranteeing Israel's security and controlling the energy resources remaining constant.

The interim government in Baghdad is functioning under US protection. Can one visualize a UN presence that would carry out the purposes of holding elections, writing a constitution and utilizing aid for the reconstruction of Iraq? The US is clearly anxious to reduce its military involvement, and persists in relying on the build-up of Iraqi security forces to suppress terrorism and crime, and to create conditions in which some visible improvement is possible in the life of the Iraqi people. Washington expects that

the forces sent for the protection of the UN staff will have greater acceptability, and will not meet the negative response to offers of troops by Turkey and Jordan.

Some analysts believe that the Iraqi insurgency is not restricted to the Baathists and "Islamists" but has assumed the character of a national uprising. Many US specialists think that the ethnic divide between the Kurds in the North, the Sunnis in the middle and the majority Shias in the South can be exploited to fragment the insurrection, and that the

great majority of the Iraqis want a return to normal life.

One would have to wait and see if this new exit strategy can work for the US. The chances of a Bush re-election are somehow seen linked to two developments, in which Pakistan is being expected to play a major role. One is the capture of Osama bin Laden, who may be hiding in the mountains on the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan. The other is the success of the initiative to involve the UN in Iraq, and the appointment of a senior Pakistani diplomat as the representative of the UN secretary-general in Iraq again places high expectations. The sending of a contingent of Pakistani soldiers to protect the UN representative will expose them to local challenges, as well as to accusations of being instruments of US imperialism.

One cannot but recall an earlier period, when Pakistan joined the Baghdad Pact in 1955, over the strong opposition of Arab nationalists who had been mobilized against the West by Gamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt. One hopes there will not be a polarization within the Arab and Muslim ranks, and that the ongoing efforts to increase the role and effectiveness of the OIC will succeed.

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