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US allies behind Iraq's death squads and ethnic cleansing

BY JONATHAN STEELE

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BAGHDAD - MUCH ink, as well as indignation, is being spent on whether Iraq is on the verge of, in the midst of, or nowhere near civil war. Wherever you stand in this largely semantic debate, the one certainty is that the seedbed for the country's self-destruction is Iraq's plethora of militias. In the apt phrase of Zalmay Khalilzad, the US ambassador in Baghdad, they are the "infrastructure of civil war".

He is not the first US overlord in Iraq to spot the danger. Shortly before the formal transfer of sovereignty to Iraqis, America's then top official Paul Bremer ordered all militias to disband. Some members could join the new army. Others would have to look for civilian work.

His decree was not enforced and now, two years later, this failure has come back to haunt Iraq. "More Iraqis are dying from militia violence than from the terrorists," Khalilzad said recently. "The militias need to be under control."

His blunt comment came in the wake of over 1,000 abductions and murders in a single month, most of them blamed on Shia militias. Terrified residents of Baghdad's mainly Sunni areas talk of cars roaring up after dark, uninhibited by the police in spite of the curfew. They enter homes and seize people, whose bodies turn up later, often garotted or marked with holes from electric drills — evidence of torture before assassination.

Khalilzad's denunciation of the militias was an extraordinary turnaround, given that the focus of US military activity since the fall of Saddam Hussein has been the battle against foreign jihadis and a nationalist Sunni-led insurgency. Suddenly the US faces a greater "enemy within" — militias manned by the Shia community, once seen by the US as allies, and run by government ministers.

The new line, if it sticks, marks an end to previous ambiguity. Under Bremer there was a tendency to see some militias as good, that is, on the US side, such as the peshmerga fighters that belong to the two large Kurdish parties, and others as bad, such as the Mahdi army of the Shia cleric, Moqtada al-Sadr, who opposes the occupation. A third militia, the Badr organisation, was also tolerated. It is the armed wing of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, a leading Shia political party which supported the invasion and is Washington's main interlocutor in the Shia coalition.

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US officials paid lip service to the need to disband the militias, but never showed any sense of urgency. As a Pentagon report to Congress put it last year: "The realities of Iraq's political and security landscape work against completing the transition and reintegration of all Iraq's militias in the short term." Iraqi leaders praised the militias, claiming they were subordinate to the defence and interior ministries, and therefore in no way a rogue element. The Badr organisation has even been put in charge of defending the home of the Shias' revered religious leader, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.

The prime minister, Ibrahim Jaafari, described the Badr organisation last summer as a "shield" defending Iraq, while the president, Jalal Talabani, claimed the Badr organisation and the peshmerga were patriots who "are important to fulfilling this sacred task, establishing a democratic, federal and independent Iraq". The flaw in the picture was that while the Kurds and Shias had two militias each, the Sunnis had none. Sunni chiefs could rustle up a few gunmen from extended family ranks, when necessary, as had been done for centuries, but there was nothing on the scale of Badr, the Mahdi, or the peshmerga. Many Sunnis welcomed the anti-occupation insurgents as a kind of surrogate militia.

Sunni anger increased with evidence of secret prisons, run by the interior ministry, where hundreds of men and boys, mainly Sunnis, were tortured, and of "death squads" operating against Sunnis. In response, Baghdad's Sunni neighbourhoods have started to form vigilante groups to defend their turf.

US officials now view the militias differently. Phasing them out by integrating their members into the official forces of law and order is seen as risky, unless the leadership changes. In February this year the new Pentagon line was that integration could result in security forces that "may be more loyal to their political support organisation than to the central Iraqi government", according to a new study, Iraq's Evolving Insurgency and the Risk of Civil War by Anthony Cordesman, an Iraq expert at Washington's Centre for Strategic and International Studies. Now the US is trying to ensure that political control over the interior and defence ministries is jointly managed by an all-party security council.

The encouraging signs are that Iraqi leaders are denouncing sectarian violence. Provocations such as last week's suicide attack on a Shia mosque in Baghdad appear to be the work of "outsiders". No one has claimed responsibility, but they were probably planned by agitators, foreign or Iraqi, who want to split Iraq's fragile society for their own political ends. There is also comfort in the fact that sectarian street murders stem from militias who are controllable rather than from unorganised mobs.

Just as generals do, diplomats and journalists tend to re-fight the last war. Schooled in Bosnia and Kosovo, Washington's officials came to Iraq with the notion that because some Iraqis were Shia and others Sunni, these identities were bound to clash. This simplification was accepted by much of the media, influenced by their own Balkan experiences. It gathered weight when people watched the sectarian behaviour of Iraq's religious leaders, particularly among the Shia. They had led the resistance to Saddam and saw no reason to retreat from politics once he was gone.

In fact, Iraq has no history of Balkan-style pogroms where neighbour turns against neighbour, burning homes and shops. But it could develop now. The rampaging by Shia militias and the rise of defensive Sunni vigilantes have launched a low-intensity ethnic cleansing. Up to 30,000 people have left their homes in the last few weeks. The crucial question is whether the militias can be rolled back at this late stage. Having allowed them to defy their initial banning orders, as well as

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Iraq's new constitution, which outlawed them, can the US persuade or force its Iraqi allies to disband them? Confronting the Sunni insurgency means, in crude terms, confronting an enemy. Confronting the biggest militias, Badr and the Kurdish peshmerga, means the US must confront its friends.

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