

## **Finding a New Role**

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Having opposed the war, the UN begins to think about a role in the aftermath.

As American tanks raced towards Iraq's southern border with Kuwait, the UN Security Council met to discuss the work of its weapons inspectors - now withdrawn from Iraq. The deliberations were surreal, but the only alternative was for the Security Council to recognise, and thereby condone, the imminent war it had rejected.

Reality intruded, briefly, in the form of US Secretary General Kofi Annan, who addressed the Security Council to remind belligerents of their responsibility for the protection of civilians. "Without in any way assuming or diminishing that ultimate responsibility, we in the United Nations will do whatever we can to help," he said.

Annan said he would propose an amended oil-for-food programme - which already feeds half of Iraq's population and which may, after the war, have to feed the other half too - to enable the UN to replace the Iraqi regime in contracting for supplies. The US had been in quiet discussions with the UN Secretariat for weeks over post-war scenarios and the UN had to tread with care so as not to be seen to condone an invasion which Annan himself has said would violate the UN Charter.

While President George Bush was insouciant about his failure to get a UN resolution, he knew that his closest ally, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, needed it to legitimise his participation in war. In addition to securing rhetorical commitment to Iraqi ownership of their own oil (while sidestepping the question of who would be allowed to buy it), Blair was able to wrest one major concession from Bush: a public promise that the UN would be involved in reconstruction, including a post facto resolution to legalise the occupying regime.

Politically, the promise was enough to enable Blair to retain his development minister, Claire Short, who only days earlier had threatened to resign over the prime minister's "reckless" diplomacy. Robin Cook, Blair's former foreign secretary, had already resigned, delivering a powerful and punishing resignation speech.

The model for the UN's new role, such as it is, seems to be Kosovo. In that case, international intervention was not approved by an explicit Security Council vote. But the UN gave a retrospective seal of approval by setting up a UN civil administration. Countries which had opposed the bombing, such as Russia, were keen to climb back into the game, and the Americans reluctantly consented.

In Iraq in 2003, it seems unlikely that Washington will allow more than token UN participation in the post-war.

Most Security Council members are despairing over the damage they feel has been done to the UN Charter, and will probably hope that it may be repairable, through a resolution to signal the war's end, even if France, Russia and Germany may play hardball with the US on the details.

Justice will be one such troubling detail. Washington has announced a list of most-wanted Iraqis. Yet it has appeared to contradict itself by offering Saddam Hussein exile - and, implicitly, amnesty.

The venue of any trials will be problematic. Washington has vehemently opposed the International Criminal

Court, so that option can be discounted. But shuttling detainees off to Guantanamo Bay, even without charges, risks adding to regional anger over the intervention. Some kind of ad-hoc UN-sponsored tribunal seemed a possible compromise that could confirm, also, a UN role.

The UN may also seek to revive the role of the inspectors. Although Hans Blix's job has ended for now, his team has amassed vast expertise on Iraqi weapons systems. In the aftermath of war, as the US seeks to publicize the extent of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, many at the UN hope the inspectors will be called back to provide independent confirmation of any findings - even if this confirms the solidity of Washington's stated reason for going to war.

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