

# The dawn of a new Iraq - or a return to secrecy and killing?

**James Meek in Baghdad**  
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Something happened in Baghdad this week, but what exactly? What we know is that somewhere in Saddam Hussein's sprawling former cantonment on the banks of the Tigris, behind silver miles of new razor wire, behind high concrete barriers stronger than most medieval fortifications, behind sandbags, five security checks, US armoured vehicles, US armoured soldiers, special forces of various countries and private security guards, behind secrecy and a fear of killing so intense that none save a handful of people knew it had happened until after it was over, an American bureaucrat handed a piece of paper to an Iraqi judge, jumped on a helicopter and left the country.

Paul Bremer's departure and the handover of a limited form of sovereignty to an unelected Iraqi government were to be the end of military occupation and the beginning of independence.

From London and Washington it may look that way, and Iraqis too seem eager to believe that Monday was the beginning of the end of chaos and fear. But the Bremer who waved from the steps of his departing C-130 did not only leave sovereignty, in the form of a terse two-paragraph letter, with the Iraqis. He left 160,000 foreign troops, a broken economy and a land beset by ruthless, reckless armed bands.

The first thing reporters saw as they came into the sunshine from the banal auditorium where the newly sworn-in Iraqi government hailed the new era was two US Apache helicopter gunships, pirouetting low in the furnace sky.

The journey out of the fortified cantonment, previously known as the Green Zone, now renamed the International Zone, still winds through ramparts and fortifications, past jumpy US soldiers threatening to confiscate mobile phones. In the streets beyond menacing signs in English and Arabic still hang beneath US watchtowers. "Keep Away, Deadly Force Authorised." "Tactical Military Vehicles ONLY." "Do Not Enter Or You Will Be Shot."

The handover was held in a single-storey former Saddam-era guesthouse in the zone that has been given to the new prime minister, Ayad Allawi. Fear of the bombers gave the occasion all the pomp of an office leaving do. It lasted only 20 minutes.

Mr Allawi's residence and a similar building for the president, Sheikh Ghazi Ajil al-Yawar, look out on pleasant lawned gardens studded with pools and orange trees. It is a delightful setting from which to reinvent independent Iraq, except that Mr Allawi and Mr Yawar are sandwiched by the enormous weight of American enthusiasm, there to make sure they get the independence thing right.

On one side lies the huge new US embassy. On the other side is Saddam Hussein's lavish principal former palace or, as it has been known since Monday, the annex to the US embassy.

Mr Yawar had hoped to be waking up in that palace on Tuesday morning, but was told the Americans needed it too badly; in that sense, as in so many others, the first day of independence would be just another day in the zone.

The first many people around the zone knew of Monday's events was an Iraqi flag billowing in the hairdryer- hot breeze from the zone's tallest building. Inside the zone logos of the now defunct

Coalition Provisional Authority which Mr Bremer headed, emblems which had started to look permanent, disappeared.

There was a curious ceremony in the zone's convention centre - a building that apart from the odd Saddamish mural could be a convention centre anywhere - intended to mark the handover of military authority from the coalition to the Iraqi military. A column of US cavalrymen, dressed in the blue shirts, kerchiefs, gauntlets and black broad-brimmed hats of the Custer era, marched out across the carpeting, bearing their departing standards. It was as if they were leaving. But they were not, any more than Mr Bremer's departure is America leaving.

We will have to wait for Mr Bremer's memoirs to know what he thought, looking down as his Chinook banked over the parched date groves, yellow cubescape and sluggish brown river of summer Baghdad for the last time.

Yet between the disastrous spell of looting that began the US occupation; the disbanding of the army and police that enabled crime to flourish; the failure to rebuild the country; the continued presence of a vast US force; and the uncertainty surrounding future elections, the creation of a transitional government seems a thin achievement, particularly when that government is beginning to show authoritarian tendencies.

But an Iraqi government, any Iraqi government, seems to many like the overdue fulfilment of what they wanted from the Americans all along: to painlessly extract Saddam and his family from their lives, like a bad tooth, and immediately vanish. Instead the dentist moved in.

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