

US demands Iraq's new government repudiate "de-Baathification"

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4 May 2005

The new Shiite-dominated Iraqi government of Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari is being confronted by insistent US demands that the former members of Saddam Hussein's Baath Party, whom the American military has recruited into Iraq's internal security forces, keep their positions.

Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld spelt out the US position during a trip to Iraq in early April. Rumsfeld warned Jaafari that any attempt to remove the Baathists would face opposition from Washington. Last week, in welcoming the announcement of Jaafari's cabinet, President Bush repeated the demand in equally clear terms.

Bush declared: "One of the real dangers is that as politics takes hold in Iraq whether or not the civilian government will keep intact the military structure what we're helping them to develop. And our message throughout government to the Iraqis is 'keep stability, don't disrupt the training that has gone on...'"

The US demand is highly unpalatable to the main faction in the new government—the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA). The UIA is an unstable coalition between various Shiite parties and groups, all of which were suppressed under the Baathists. It includes not only the Shiite fundamentalist Daawa Party and Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), both of which have consistently collaborated with the US forces in Iraq, but supporters of the Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, who led an uprising against the occupation last year.

The UIA also includes the formerly CIA-financed Iraqi National Congress (INC) of Ahmed Chalabi, who fell out with the US occupation in large part due to his insistence on a policy of "de-Baathification"—a systematic purge from the Iraqi state of all senior members of Hussein's party.

As far as all these groupings are concerned, de-Baathification is not a policy that can be put aside easily. Reflecting the ambitions of the Shiite bourgeoisie, they have sought to use the US occupation to supplant the long-established Sunni ruling elite, which has held the main positions of political power since Iraq was carved out of the Ottoman Empire after World War I.

Following its seizure of power in 1968, the Sunni-based Baath Party protected the wealth and privileges of the Sunni establishment by unleashing state repression against the Iraqi workers' movement, the Kurdish population in the north and, on numerous occasions, the Shiite masses and clerical, tribal and business elite.

The direct and indirect support of the Shiite parties and leading clerics such as Ali al-Sistani for the US occupation of Iraq has, in large part, stemmed from the belief that the Bush administration would repay their collaboration by removing Baathists and handing the key positions of state authority over to the Shiite establishment.

The political power could then be utilised to break the Sunni elites' domination in other areas.

Daawa, SCIRI and Sistani have used all their influence to oppose any struggle by the Shiite masses against the US takeover of Iraq. To retain political support, they held out the prospect that a Shiite-led government would bring the Baathists to account for their numerous crimes against the Iraqi people and deliver democratic rights to the Shiite majority.

In many respects, the initial stages of the US occupation proceeded along the lines anticipated by the Shiite establishment. Under conditions where the US military expected little resistance, the American-controlled authority in Iraq disbanded the Iraqi Army and appointed Chalabi to oversee a purge of tens of thousands of Baathists from the Iraqi government, security forces and civil service. Hundreds of leading members of the former regime and ruling class were imprisoned.

The development of the nation-wide insurgency against the occupation forces, however, produced a shift in US policy. By November 2003, it was apparent that those resisting the US forces were not primarily doing so out of loyalty to the former regime. The dominant sentiment in the resistance was nationalist and partly religious-motivated opposition to the US takeover of the country.

In Baghdad and southern Iraq, the dominant voice against the US was Sadr's Shiite fundamentalist movement, which for over 20 years had been one of the most prominent opponents of Hussein. The resistance in Sunni centres such as the cities of Fallujah and Ramadi was largely being led by clerics and fundamentalists of the Wahhabist trend in Sunni Islam, who had also been persecuted by the Baathists.

The response of the Bush administration was to build up US troop numbers and launch an offensive against both Fallujah and Sadr's movement in April 2004. At the same time, de-Baathification was repudiated. Guiding the shift in policy were simple calculations. Firstly, the Baathists were veterans at repressing the Iraqi people. Secondly, providing US imperialism guaranteed their material position, the former supporters of Saddam Hussein had no motive for siding with a resistance that was as much anti-Baathist as it was anti-occupation.

Politically, the change in US policy led to the sidelining of Chalabi, once considered in Washington as a possible puppet leader of Iraq. In order to remove him as head of the de-Baathification commission, he was charged with corruption, accused of spying for Iran. The INC offices were raided by Iraqi police and US troops in May 2004. In his place, the former Baathist Iyad Allawi, the head of the US-financed Iraqi National Accord (INA), was elevated and installed last June as the interim prime minister.

In the ensuing months, the CIA and the US military worked with Allawi to recruit thousands of individuals who were formerly part of Saddam Hussein's repressive apparatus into the US-financed and trained Iraqi security forces. The most prominent Baathist unit recruited in 2004 was the 10,000-strong Special Police Commandos force, which operates under the command of the interior ministry and the supervision of US advisors.

The Commandos were assembled almost exclusively from former members of the Baathist special forces and elite Republican Guard. The man selected to command the unit was General Adnan Thabit, a former Iraqi intelligence officer and colleague of Allawi who had taken part in the failed CIA-backed coup against Saddam Hussein in 1996. General Rashid Flaih, Hussein's security chief in the city of Nasiriyah in 1991 who directed the bloody suppression of the Shiite rebellion in the area following the first Gulf War, was appointed one of its brigade commanders.

The *New York Times* magazine reported on May 1 that the main American advisor working with the unit is James Steele, who commanded the US advisors who worked with the right-wing death squads in El Salvador in the 1980s. Steele's experience has now been transferred to Iraq, where the conduct of the Commandos has the same essential aim and modus operandi as the Salvadoran squads. In exchange for lucrative pay and protection from punishment for past atrocities under Hussein, the Commandos are being used against the resistance to the US occupation. Thus far, they have reportedly been deployed against the populations of Samarra, Mosul and Ramadi, as well as in areas of Baghdad.

The CIA and Allawi also recruited hundreds of former agents of Hussein's secret police into the interior ministry around the same time. One UIA leader, Hussein Shahrstani, told the *Washington Post* in April: "We know that most senior officials in the department [the interior ministry] are from the previous intelligence department who've been oppressing the Iraqi people." As well, up to 70 percent of the officers in the new Iraqi army are believed to be former commanders in Hussein's military.

The UIA won a majority of 140 of the 285 seats in the National Assembly in the January 30 elections. Even as it celebrated its victory, however, the growing Baathist weight in the security forces was provoking mounting alarm in its ranks. Shiite legislators alleged in March and April that the response of Allawi and the US military to the election result was to accelerate the recruitment of former Baathists.

SCIRI in particular has made repeated declarations that among the first actions of a new government will be to carry out a mass purge of the Baathists, and replace them with members of its Shiite fundamentalist Badr Corp militia. A major consideration is the fear that bowing to the US pressure and backing down over de-Baathification will shatter what little credibility the UIA parties have left in the eyes of millions of ordinary Shiites.

Shiites turned out to vote in large numbers on January 30 for two primary reasons. The UIA parties pledged they would insist on a timetable for the withdrawal of all US and foreign troops from Iraq. They also promised de-Baathification. Sistani identified himself with the UIA and called on Shiites to participate in the US-dictated political process.

Jaafari and the UIA have already alienated their base by repudiating a specified date for a US withdrawal. A call by the government for Shiites to accept Baathists running the internal security forces would only heighten the perception that Jaafari and Sistani are US puppets, and accelerate the drift of Shiite political allegiances toward Sadr's

movement.

While supporters of Sadr hold three ministries in Jaafari's cabinet, the extra-parliamentary activity of the Sadrist consists of denunciations of the government as being unwilling to fight for the aspirations of the Shiite masses. On April 9, the second anniversary of the fall of Hussein, they demonstrated their political weight by staging a huge anti-occupation and anti-Baathist rally in Baghdad's Firdos Square.

The attempt to prevent a Shiite rejection of the UIA, and with it the US occupation, has been the primary factor in the inability of Jaafari, since his appointment as prime minister on April 7, to meet US demands for a "government of national unity".

The UIA turned down the request of Allawi's INA for the interior ministry on the grounds he would continue to direct the recruitment of Baathists. It was also compelled to reject the legislators nominated by the Sunni factions to be defense minister and deputy prime minister on the grounds they had served in senior positions in Hussein's regime. In response, three Sunnis, who were part of the Shiite alliance have withdrawn from the coalition, reducing its number of seats in the 275-member National Assembly to 137.

The cabinet sworn in yesterday completely excludes Allawi's supporters and gives no prominent position to a Sunni legislator. Jaafari has still not named a defence minister, a Sunni deputy prime minister, or five other ministers. Among the unfilled ministries is the oil ministry, which the Kurdish parties had wanted. The UIA and the Kurdish parties have far-reaching differences over the future of Iraq's oil industry, particularly the northern oilfields, which the Kurds want placed under the control of the Kurdish regional government in the north.

Under US pressure to come up with a government immediately, what has been produced is a cabinet in which virtually all the key posts fall under the sway of UIA members. Jaafari will be acting defence minister, while Chalabi will be acting oil minister. Baqir Solagh Jabur, a member of SCIRI, was appointed interior minister, with other UIA members taking the national security and justice ministries.

The new regime immediately confronts a political crisis. The Shiite parties have realised their perspective of being elevated into positions of authority by the US invasion, but are being instructed by Washington to carry out a policy that could galvanise the Shiite working class and poor against them.

Jaafari's speech to the National Assembly yesterday has already been interpreted as bowing to the US due to its failure to give prominence to de-Baathification. A Shiite legislator, Ali al-Lami, warned: "This government is going to lose the public's trust. We're going to have a mass uprising in the Iraqi street. This is American interference through Jaafari's Iraqi-American advisors."



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