US issues more demands on Iraqi government to include former Baathists

James Cogan
20 May 2005

The unexpected visit by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to Iraq on May 15 was a visible sign of the alarm in US ruling circles over the situation in the occupied country. With more than 140,000 American troops tied down by the anti-occupation insurgency, the newly-formed Shiite-dominated government of Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari is being increasingly viewed in Washington as incapable of functioning as a viable US puppet regime.

The primary purpose of Rice's trip was to demand that Jaafari and his Shiite-based United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) make far more explicit overtures toward Sunni Muslim political leaders, many of whom had positions in the former Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein. US strategists, with little justification, continue to assert that incorporating various Sunni figures into the new government will dramatically decrease the scale of the insurgency.

The trigger for Rice's visit appears to have been US anger over the announcement on May 10 that only two Sunnis would be part of the 55-member committee delegated by the government to draft a new constitution for Iraq. This followed the refusal of the Shiite parties to allow certain Sunni legislators to take ministries in the cabinet due to their Baathist past. Shiite leaders are also continuing to call for a purge of the thousands of Baathists that the US military and the former interim prime minister Iyad Allawi recruited last year into the new Iraqi Army and internal security apparatus.

An unnamed Bush administration official told the *New York Times*: "You don't want to give the impression that this is a 'made-in-Washington-government', but now there's a constant and continuing concern in Washington that this government is falling into a narrow ethnic base and needs to do more about that."

Significantly, Rice's first stop was not Baghdad, but Irbil, the Kurdish capital in northern Iraq. Rice met with Massoud Barzani, the Kurdish nationalist leader and president of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG).

The KRG consists of Iraq's three northern-most, predominantly Kurdish-populated provinces. Under the constitution imposed on Iraq by the US occupation, the Kurdish nationalists were rewarded for their years of collaboration with the US war plans against Saddam Hussein's regime with a fully autonomous region. While theoretically part of a "federal Iraq", the KRG presides over a de-facto independent state. It commands its own armed forces, the *peshmerga* militia, and the central government in Baghdad has only limited powers in the area.

Rice's meeting with Barzani could only have been taken as an implicit threat to the Shiite parties. The UIA's dominant position in the new government rests on the support of the Kurdish parties in the National Assembly. A week before Rice's visit, this dependency was graphically underscored when the oath taken by members of Jaafari's cabinet omitted an agreed-on clause pledging the ministers to preserve Iraq's "federal and democratic regime"—with the "federal" referring to the Kurdish region.

The Kurdish response was an immediate threat to withdraw from Jaafari's government. Barzani declared on May 6: "The removal of the reference to a federal Iraq is a violation of the law and a serious threat to our alliance. I can only hope it was not intentional and that this will be corrected as soon as possible." Jaafari was compelled to recall his cabinet and have them take their oath a second time with the reference to federalism included.

Rice's time in Irbil was spent expressing the Bush administration's support for the Kurdish nationalists, and, it can be presumed, aligning Barzani behind the US demand for the inclusion of more Sunnis and former Baathists in the government.

This month has witnessed a frenzy of violence in Iraq, particularly in Baghdad. Dozens of car-bombings have taken place, some clearly detonated for no other purpose but to kill and maim Shiites. While the US military has laid responsibility at the feet of Sunni Islamic extremists, rumours on the Iraqi street variously blame the US military itself, the new Iraqi security forces or the militias of the pro-US factions such as Allawi's Iraqi National Accord.

Shiite and Sunni clerics have also been assassinated in what appear to be sectarian killings. A leading Sunni imam has publicly accused the Shiite militia, the Badr Brigade, of killing the Sunnis and called for the closure of all Sunni mosques for three days in protest.

Whoever is responsible, the bombings and killings have been used in Washington to intensify the pressure on Jaafari and the Shiite parties to bend to US demands.

According to the *Washington Post*, US commander General George Casey met with Jaafari for two days just prior to Rice's trip to urge him to "respond with strong and decisive action or risk erosion of confidence and a widening sense of insecurity among Iraqis". Jaafari responded by extending for another 30 days the state of emergency imposed in November 2004 by Allawi, just before the US assault on the city of Fallujah.

Following her meeting with Jaafari on May 15, Rice told CNN: "If there is to be a united Iraq in the future, then Sunnis have to be

© World Socialist Web Site

included in the processes going forward—just as they've been included in this government."

Jaafari verbally accommodated Rice, declaring "we will try to find ways to have a bigger Sunni participation" in the constitutional committee. The Sunni defense minister in the new government, Sadoun al-Dulaimi, followed this with an announcement the Iraqi security forces would no longer carry out raids and searches on mosques or arrest clerics. Dozens of Sunni mosques have been searched and clerics detained as part of US-led operations against the insurgency.

The main parties in the UIA however—the Islamic fundamentalist Daawa, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and Ahmed Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress (INC)—are showing little enthusiasm for the attempts to woo elements of the Sunni elite.

The most obvious problem is the fact that neither the underground Sunni resistance organisations, nor the most authoritative public Sunni leadership groups such as the Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS), recognise the legitimacy of the transitional government and are committed to ending the occupation. The vast majority of Iraqi Sunnis boycotted the January 30 election in response to a call by the AMS and other groups.

The US actions since the 2003 invasion—indiscriminate violence, wholesale arrests and torture and the mass killings in Fallujah last year—have created mass hostility toward the occupation, particularly among the Sunni population, which has borne the brunt of US counter-insurgency operations.

The most recent American offensive, Operation Matador in western Anbar province near the Syrian border, is a case in point. According to a Knight Ridder report, a Sunni tribe in the area requested the US military launch an attack on a concentration of alleged foreign fighters. US marines responded with an indiscriminate assault on the city of Al Qa'im and surrounding villages that has served only to inflame the very tribe who requested the operation.

The operation ended with US claims of 125 dead foreign and Iraqi insurgents. The locals claim that most of the casualties were their people. A former governor of Anbar province, Fasal al-Goud, told Kinght Ridder: "The Americans were bombing whole villages and saying they were only after the foreigners. An AK-47 can't distinguish between a terrorist and a tribesman, so how could a missile or a tank?"

The director of Al-Qa'im hospital, Doctor Hamdi Al-Alusi, told Al-Jazeera: "Ambulances were prevented from moving and the medical teams have left the city centre because it has been destroyed.... There are scores of wounded people and scores of victims who cannot reach the hospital or anywhere else. We pray to god and implore the whole world to look into what happened to Al-Qa'im and adjacent cities."

Under such conditions, any figures from the Sunni elite who associate themselves with the US occupation will be viewed as traitors and puppets by the majority of the population. The individuals who are most likely to come forward are discredited elements from Hussein's former regime, who have lost power and privilege and are seeking to regain it, as well as obtaining immunity from prosecution for Baathist crimes against the Iraqi people.

The primary concern of the Shiite parties is how a US-dictated orientation toward such figures will be perceived among millions of ordinary Iraqi Shiites. Throughout its 35-year rule over Iraq, the Baath Party directed fierce repression against left-wing movements and religious currents based among the Shiite working class and rural poor. Some of the bloodiest repression took place with direct or indirect American endorsement.

Daawa and SCIRI, along with the leading Shiite cleric Ali al-Sistani, have justified their collaboration with the US invasion and occupation of Iraq on the grounds that it could be exploited to deliver political power to the Shiite parties, which they would use to bring the Baathists to justice and deliver improved living standards to the Shiite masses.

Two years on from the invasion, the conditions of life in Iraq are catastrophic, as documented by the recently-published UN-financed study (See: "US war in Iraq yields a social 'tragedy'"). The UIA has no prospect of delivering the masses any meaningful improvement in their living standards and has already backed away from its election pledge to obtain a timetable for US withdrawal from Iraq. They now fear that a repudiation of "de-Baathification" will see Shiite political allegiances shift behind the movement headed by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr.

The Sadrists led uprisings against the occupation in April and August 2004. Following a ceasefire negotiated in September, Sadr gave tacit support for the sham election in January and has called on his militia to not engage in attacks on the US-led forces. A number of his supporters were elected as candidates for the UIA. At the same time, however, the Sadrists have maintained their denunciations of the occupation and their fierce anti-Baathist rhetoric.

Immediately following Rice's visit, on May 16, Sadr stepped up the pressure on the UIA parties with his first press conference in close to nine months. He declared from Najaf: "I demand several things: the punishment of Saddam and I call on the Iraqi government, religious movements and political factions to work harder to kick out the occupier. I want the immediate withdrawal of the occupation forces."

The Bush administration's pressure on Jaafari may result in more Sunnis in the puppet government, but it will have little impact on the broader insurgency and is preparing the conditions for another rebellion among the majority Shiites.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site