

Sunni elite moves toward an accommodation with US occupation of Iraq

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Over 1,000 representatives of the Sunni Muslim political and religious elite that previously dominated the Baathist state headed by Saddam Hussein gathered in Baghdad on May 22 to debate participation in the US-dictated political reorganisation of Iraq. While still tentative, the conference marks a shift by a previously recalcitrant faction of the Sunni bourgeois establishment toward legitimising and joining with the post-invasion regime.

Among those in attendance on May 22 were leading members of the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) and the Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS), the umbrella organisation of Sunni clerics that called for a boycott of the US-organised January 30 elections to form a “transitional government” in Iraq. The vast majority of Iraq’s Sunnis who make up at least 20 percent of the population refused to vote. As a result, just 17 of the 275 seats in the National Assembly are held by Sunni legislators.

Leaders of some of the main Arab tribes in the Sunni heartland provinces of central and northern Iraq where the anti-occupation resistance is most intense also took part, as did former Iraqi officers, many of whom are believed by the US military to be advising the insurgents.

The AMS and the IIP leadership wield considerable authority among the Sunni population due to their stance during the elections. While initially toying with participating, they called for a boycott amidst the US offensive last November on the predominantly Sunni city of Fallujah. The destruction and killings by the US military enraged Iraqis of all religious and ethnic backgrounds, especially Sunnis, whose communities have borne the brunt of US intimidation and repression. The boycott became the political focus for a mass rejection of the occupation.

On May 22, however, the erstwhile opponents of the US takeover of Iraq mingled with representatives of Adnan Pachachi, the Sunni exile who returned to Iraq in 2003 and has collaborated with the occupation from the beginning. With minimal support among the population, his electoral list received less than 13,000 votes in the January election and won no seats in the parliament.

The conference statement did not go so far as to openly disassociate the participants from the armed resistance. It declared that “resisting the occupier is a legitimate right”. At the same time, however, it referred to liberating Iraq by all “legal means”, a clause that lends credibility to US claims that the armed resistance is criminal. Most significantly, it called for the nomination of 10 to 15 representatives to take part in the recently-formed committee delegated with drafting a new Iraqi constitution by August.

Involvement in drafting the constitution amounts to an endorsement of the next stage of elections being organised under US occupation. A

referendum to adopt the constitution is scheduled to be held by October 15 and new elections on December 15. If the proposed constitution is agreed to by the IIP and AMS and ratified by the referendum, it is unlikely these parties will call for a further boycott.

The agreement to take part in the process amounts to an implicit abandonment by the AMS of its demand for an immediate withdrawal of all occupation troops and the holding of elections free of foreign interference.

Members of both organisations used the conference to explicitly call for an end to the boycott tactic. AMS representative Ahmed Abdul Ghafur Sammarrai stated: “We must not make the same mistake again. Sunnis must unite to prepare to participate in the next election.” IIP delegate Tarik al-Hashimy said: “We’re trying to build a concrete coalition for the next election.”

Hinting at the type of coalition that may be forged in coming months, Pachachi told the *New York Times* that he had recently met with Iyad Allawi, the former US-installed interim prime minister, and they “had agreed to join forces to compete with the more religious Shiite parties”.

The timing and tone of the gathering suggests that behind-the-scenes many more negotiations have been taking place, including between Sunni powerbrokers and US officials and, most likely, with Allawi’s Iraqi National Accord (INA). It coincides with a concerted push by the Bush administration for the incorporation of significant elements of the Sunni establishment into the new government.

Since the January 30 election the US publicly expressed its frustration with the Shiite United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) coalition that won the majority of seats in the National Assembly and dominates the transitional government headed by Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari.

The UIA articulates the interests of a predominantly Shiite layer of the Iraqi elite, which was excluded from political power and related economic benefits under Hussein. It is endorsed by the leading Shiite cleric in Iraq, Ali al-Sistani, and is centred on the fundamentalist Daawa Party and Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). It also includes Ahmed Chalabi’s Iraqi National Congress (INC)—a grouping of mainly US-based Iraqi businessmen and land-owners who were driven into exile when the Iraqi monarchy was overthrown in 1958 or who fell out with the military and Baathist regimes that ruled Iraq over the following decades.

On a number of occasions, Bush administration officials, US military officers and the American media have pressured the UIA to repudiate its policy of excluding former members of Saddam Hussein’s regime and military from the state apparatus being assembled under US occupation—a policy dubbed “de-Baathification”. Most recently, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice flew to Iraq on

May 15 to personally demand that Jaafari include more Sunni political figures in the drafting of the constitution.

Behind the US opposition to de-Baathification is the assessment that one driving force behind the insurgency—which is tying down close to 140,000 US troops and costing more than \$1 billion per week to fight—is the resentment of the former Baathist establishment and Sunni middle class at their loss of power and wealth since 2003. That is, they are not fighting out of “die-hard” loyalty to the old regime, as US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld declared repeatedly in the early stages of the occupation, but to restore the privileges of the Sunni elite.

The rough draft of a study into the Iraqi insurgency published on May 19 by the US thinktank, the Center for International and Strategic Studies, states for example:

“The CIA has acknowledged in classified studies that Baathist and ex-regime loyalists represent only a part of the insurgency... The largest element of the insurgency appears to be newly radicalised Iraqi Sunnis. According to the CIA reports, the Sunni loss of power, prestige and economic influence is a key factor, as is unemployment and a loss of personal status—direct and disguised unemployment among young Sunni men has been 40 to 60 percent in many areas ever since the fall of Saddam Hussein. Many insurgents are motivated by tribal or family grievances, nationalism and religious duty. Others are motivated by the US occupation—particularly those who have lost a loved one fighting US forces—and the political and economic turbulence that accompanied the occupation.”

After initially pursuing a policy of de-Baathification, the US installation of Iyad Allawi as interim prime minister in June 2004 marked an initial turn toward what could be called a policy of “re-Baathification”. Allawi, a secular Shiite and former Baathist, oversaw the wholesale recruitment of hundreds of former Baathist secret police into the new internal security ministry and thousands of officers from Hussein’s armed forces into the new Iraqi Army. In November 2004, Allawi facilitated the massive US offensive against the city of Fallujah, which was largely controlled by Islamic fundamentalist opponents of both the occupation and the former regime.

However, Allawi’s Iraqi List coalition received only 14 percent of the vote in the January 30 election, compared with 48 percent for the Shiite alliance. The Bush administration has therefore been compelled to base a transitional government on the UIA parties, who represent social forces that see the realisation of their interests as bound up with undermining the position of the former, predominantly Sunni ruling stratum.

Mass hostility to the occupation, combined with the power struggle between the rival factions of the ruling elite, has produced a dramatic upsurge in the scale of violence in Iraq in the months since. There has been a sharp increase in what are clearly sectarian bombings and killings targeting Shiites and an increasing number of retaliatory attacks on Sunni figures, raising the danger of a descent toward civil war. The AMS last week publicly accused SCIRI’s Badr Corp militia of assassinating several Sunni clerics and closed down hundreds of Sunni mosques for three days in protest.

The US military has been forced to launch three major offensives on Sunni areas this month—two in western Iraq and one in the suburbs of Baghdad—in an attempt to stem the constant insurgent attacks on occupation forces. US casualties have climbed from 36 dead in March to 62 so far in May, with more 400 more wounded.

As the quagmire deepens, a *New York Times* editorial on May 20 succinctly summed up the conclusions being drawn in Washington. It

declared that as long as the Shiite-dominated government continued to “shun a serious political strategy to draw away Sunni support from the insurgents, large numbers of American troops will be stuck fighting a prolonged and bloody counterinsurgency in much of northern and western Iraq”.

The *Times* solution was explicit: “It is understandable that Iraq’s Shiites and Kurds, who suffered so much under Saddam Hussein, are uncomfortable about letting people who served his predominantly Sunni regime back into power. But unless lower- and middle-echelon Baathists are allowed to serve, much of the Sunni professional class will remain excluded from government and sympathetic to the insurgents.”

The push by the Bush administration to impose this perspective is a measure of the desperation in US ruling circles over the state of affairs in Iraq. After promoting the lie that Iraq was invaded to “liberate” its people from Saddam Hussein, Washington is now attempting to buy off a significant proportion of the Baathist elite and state apparatus that kept him in power with the offer of political positions.

The US calculates that incorporating Sunni political leaders into an American client-state will confuse and disorientate the broad hostility toward the occupation among Sunnis and divide the insurgency. Moreover, US plans to decrease the number of American troops in Iraq hinge on assembling a local state apparatus that is capable of maintaining a reign of terror against the population and forcing it to bow down before the indefinite US domination of the country. Those with the most experience in repressing the Iraqi people are Hussein’s former security forces. Former Baathists who were recruited under Allawi in 2004 are already being used as counterinsurgency death-squads in some areas.

The US overtures have encouraged a substantial layer of the Sunni establishment to seek an accommodation with the occupation in return for some of its former privileges. In the final analysis, this venal perspective has been at the basis of the Sunni elite’s encouragement of armed resistance over the past two years. They have sought to exploit popular hostility among the broader Sunni population as a bargaining chip to extract better terms from US imperialism.

The conference on May 22 is the clearest signal yet that the IIP and the Sunni clergy are moving to use their influence to channel the Sunni masses in the reactionary direction of sectarianism. As far as delegates were concerned, the “mistake” in calling for a boycott was that it allowed their Shiite rivals to dominate the US puppet government in Baghdad.

The inability of the Iraqi bourgeoisie to unite the overwhelming popular opposition to the US occupation into a common political movement is testimony to the utter bankruptcy of any perspective that seeks to uphold private property interests and the nation-state system. The concern of all factions of the Iraqi ruling class—Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish—is not the liberation of the masses from oppression and exploitation, but maneuvering with US imperialism to enhance their own wealth and privileges.



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