

Behind the installation of Jawad al-Maliki as Iraqi prime minister

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Jawad al-Maliki, a leader of the Shiite fundamentalist Da'awa Party, was elected on Saturday to be the next prime minister of Iraq. Under the terms of the Iraqi constitution, he has 30 days in which to form a cabinet and have it approved by the parliament.

Maliki's emergence is the outcome of months of US manoeuvres to force the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA)—the coalition of seven Shiite fundamentalist movements which holds the largest number of seats in the parliament—to select a candidate and put forward policies acceptable to the Bush administration.

In February, the UIA nominated Da'awa leader Ibrahim al-Jaafari. Other parties in the parliament, which control just over half the seats and could block the choice of prime minister, insisted that someone else was put forward. The political impasse was only broken last Thursday when Jaafari finally capitulated and stood aside.

In his first statement, Maliki announced that he will seek to form the “national unity” government that has been demanded by the Bush administration over the past three months. He also declared that he would take steps to disband the militias that have been established as the country slides toward a civil war between Sunni and Shiite extremists.

His installation as prime minister was unopposed in the parliament and welcomed by US officials, including the US ambassador in Iraq Zalmay Khalilzad. Sunni Arab and Kurdish legislators have stated that they believe they can work with Maliki, while media reports have described him as “decisive”, “forceful”, “outspoken” and an “experienced political operator”.

Maliki's history is typical of the Shiite fundamentalists who have collaborated with the US occupation of Iraq over the past three years. Much of his life was spent in exile. In 1980, he fled Iraq to escape a brutal crackdown on Da'awa by the regime of Saddam Hussein. Initially he took refuge in Iran, where the Shiite fundamentalist regime of Ayatollah Khomeini had come to power the year before. He left for Syria, however, shortly after the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war in 1981. Da'awa split over its attitude to the conflict. A sizeable faction of the Iraqi Shiite exiles actively backed Iran and formed the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). Maliki

supported leaders such as Jaafari, who opposed subordinating the Iraqi movement to Tehran.

Maliki operated from Damascus until he secretly reentered Iraq in late 2002. While he was in Syria, Maliki was the head of Da'awa's military wing, which is believed to have carried out a series of assassinations and terrorist attacks against Iraqi targets during the 1980s and 1990s. Ideologically, he is a religious extremist and an advocate of Islamic law. A female Shiite legislator told the *New York Times* that she had the impression that he opposed women being involved in political affairs.

By the time of the 2003 US invasion, Maliki had established himself as one of Da'awa's key leaders. Over the past three years, he has been Jaafari's main political advisor and was the spokesman for the Shiite-dominated “transitional” government that was formed in 2005. He has also worked in two of the key committees established by the US occupation. In 2003, he sat on the de-Baathification committee which purged thousands of former members of Saddam Hussein's regime from their jobs. Last year, he was one of the leading Shiite representatives on the committee that worked closely with Khalilzad to formulate a new Iraqi constitution.

A factor in the US endorsement for Maliki is undoubtedly his role on the constitutional committee. He is a man they know will adapt himself to American demands. The US-vetted document, much of which was probably drafted by the US embassy, established the means for the plunder of Iraq's oil reserves by allowing provinces of Iraq to form “regions” that have authority over all new oil and gas fields. In the north of the country, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) is already signing contracts with foreign energy companies. In the predominantly Shiite-populated south, elements of the Shiite establishment are calling for the formation of a region that would have sway over more than half the country and as much as 60 percent of its oil and gas.

The constitution is a direct consequences of Washington's policy of divide-and-rule. A narrow layer among the Kurdish and Shiite elite have been promised an opportunity to enrich themselves by the de-facto partitioning of the country, in exchange for supporting the US in crushing the largely Sunni Arab insurgency being fought against the occupation forces. A

Kurdish regional government in the north and a Shiite regional government in the south would provide a relatively stable framework for the exploitation of Iraq's huge untapped oil reserves by US corporations.

The constitution was predictably bitterly opposed by Sunni Arab parties and clerics. The appropriation of oil revenues by regional governments in the north and south will leave the largely Sunni provinces of central and western Iraq marginalised. The alienation of the Sunni population is one of the primary factors in both the ongoing guerilla war against the US occupation forces and the sectarian violence between rival Sunni and Shiite armed groups.

At the same time, however, layers of the Sunni establishment are being encouraged to cut their losses and embrace US domination of the country in exchange for the return of certain power and privileges. A key aspect of the US call for a "national unity" government is the inclusion of leading Sunni figures in the cabinet and an end to de-Baathification policies. The hope in Washington is that it will split the Sunni-based insurgency and reduce the scale of the fighting against the occupation forces.

The campaign against Ibrahim al-Jaafari has primarily been aimed at forcing the Shiite alliance into compliance with this agenda. Along with Jaafari, it has been directed against the movement led by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, which exerts considerable influence within the UIA and was the key supporter of the Da'awa leader.

The Sadrists are essentially the faction of Da'awa that remained in the country after 1980. Their main social base is the Shiite working class and urban poor in Baghdad who are hostile to both the former Baath regime and the US occupation that has replaced it. Since 2003, the Sadrist movement has effectively ruled the huge impoverished Baghdad suburb of Sadr City through an extensive political network and their militia, the Mahdi Army.

In 2004, the Mahdi Army took up arms against the occupation forces following an attempt to crackdown on their activities. Under the terms of a ceasefire, the Sadrists agreed to stop fighting in exchange for the ability to operate politically. In order to retain support among the masses, however, their leaders continue to make demagogic demands for the withdrawal of occupation troops. They have also refused to disband their militia on the grounds it is needed to protect Shiite civilians from Sunni extremists and voice opposition to any reversal of de-Baathification.

In the December 2005 election, a large turnout by Sadr supporters helped the UIA win 128 out of the 275 seats in the parliament. At least 30 Sadrists were among those elected on the Shiite slate. Their votes were crucial in getting Jaafari re-elected as the prime ministerial candidate, against a candidate from SCIRI.

Reflecting Da'awa's dependency on the Sadrists, Jaafari ignored the demands that Shiite militias be disbanded and

distanced himself from clauses of the constitution that establish a mechanism for the oil-rich northern city of Kirkuk to be incorporated into the Kurdish region. As Baghdad is their main power base, Sadrist leaders oppose the granting of greater powers to the regions.

Jaafari also dismissed evidence that elements of the Iraqi army and police were functioning as death squads, murdering hundreds of Sunni opponents of the Shiite-dominated government. Following the destruction of a key Shiite mosque in February, members of the Mahdi Army are accused of carrying out a rampage of reprisal sectarian killings in Sunni areas. Government security forces reportedly did little to prevent the violence.

The sympathy of the Shiite fundamentalists with the Iranian regime has been another factor in the Bush administration's hostility to Jaafari's reappointment. In January, Sadr threatened that his militia would take up arms against the US military again in the event of an American attack on Iran.

For close to three months, Jaafari insisted that he would not step down as the UIA's candidate for prime minister. Throughout this time his key supporters were Da'awa leaders such as Maliki and the Sadrists, in the face of growing calls inside the UIA for Jaafari to agree to go. The back down last week suggests that the unity of the Shiite parties was on the verge of collapsing under the impact of US pressure and threats. The prospect existed of a damaging split, with a UIA faction attempting to form a governing coalition with the Kurdish and Sunni parties.

Rather than risk losing control of the government altogether, Da'awa and the Sadrists have made the venal calculation to accommodate to the US dictates. Maliki is the figure that the Shiite establishment has entrusted with the task. Nevertheless, while his government appears likely to make substantial concessions to both Kurdish and Sunni demands to appease Washington, Maliki's appointment sets the stage for a new and even bloodier stage of the US occupation of Iraq.

Maliki has proposed the incorporation of Shiite militias, including the Mahdi Army, into the Iraqi military, where they would be used against the largely Sunni-led insurgency and to terrorise the Sunni population into accepting Iraq's reduction to a US puppet state. The plan has already been denounced by leading Sunni clerics who accuse the militias of killing "thousands of Iraqis". The communal tensions that have been fomented by the US invasion and occupation can only intensify, plunging the country deeper toward a sectarian civil war.



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