

Will a coup in Iraq follow the US elections?

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Another comment has appeared in the American press foreshadowing a move by the Bush administration to remove the Shiite-dominated government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in Iraq. In an opinion piece in the October 2 *Washington Post*, the newspaper's deputy editorial editor Jackson Diehl strongly suggested that Washington may dispense with Maliki's regime shortly after the November 7 US congressional elections.

Diehl's column on Monday is part of a series of articles in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* that have the flavour of planted stories by the White House and Pentagon to condition public opinion for a US-organised coup in Baghdad. A relentless campaign is being conducted to portray Maliki's government as incapable of controlling the Shiite militias involved in the country's escalating sectarian civil war.

Diehl reported that the "central question for discussion" was whether Washington could rely on Maliki to "stabilise the country" or whether it was "necessary to override the new political system and mount some sort of intervention, led by the United States and perhaps other governments, to force the necessary deals" between rival Shiite and Sunni organisations.

Diehl left little doubt as to the answer. He damned Maliki for "still resisting forceful steps against Shiite militias" and because "negotiations with Sunni insurgents have gone nowhere". Following the US elections, he wrote, the debate "should take centre stage".

As an "explicit signal" of the anti-Maliki sentiment in Washington, Diehl cited the September 19 press conference held by former Republican secretary of state James Baker and Democrat powerbroker Lee H. Hamilton, who heads the bipartisan Iraq Study Group, which is examining "options" for American policy in Iraq. Hamilton said the "government of Iraq needs to

show its own citizens soon, and the citizens of the United States, that it is deserving of continued support". Maliki, Hamilton warned, had until "the end of this year".

On September 29, the US ambassador in Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, delivered a similar threat, declaring Maliki only had "a window of a couple of months" to act against the two largest Shiite militias—the Mahdi Army connected to cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and the Badr Organisation of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). The Sadrists and SCIRI are the two largest factions within Maliki's government. Khalilzad told journalists: "They both need to be brought down."

The *Washington Post* has published two reports in the past week citing the views of unnamed US military officers that the "lack of strong Iraqi political leadership" was preventing the new Iraqi military from either replacing the American troops fighting the Sunni-based insurgency or being used to crush the Shiite militias. A US army battalion commander told the newspaper: "You fix the government, you fix the problem".

The open threats against the Iraqi government underscore the fraudulent character of the Bush administration's claims to be establishing "democracy" in Iraq. From the outset, Washington's aim was to create a pliable client state that would open Iraq's vast oil and gas reserves to US-based energy conglomerates and allow its territory to be used for permanent US military bases. The White House operates with open contempt for any notion that Iraq is a sovereign state.

Behind the undisguised hostility toward Maliki is the view that his government has exacerbated the difficulties facing the US occupation. The elections in January have been followed by civil war and rising levels of anti-US attacks. US plans for Maliki to head a government of national unity, to reconcile alienated

Sunni parties and divide the armed resistance, are in tatters. Over 3,000 Iraqis are being killed each month and large parts of the country, including much of Baghdad, have been plunged into utter chaos.

This catastrophe has intensified the hatred toward the American military presence. A recent poll found that 92 percent of Sunnis support attacks on US forces. Significantly, 62 percent of Shiites, who make up more than 60 percent of the population, now agree with armed struggle against the occupation. In January, just 41 percent of Shiites expressed support for insurgent activity.

Over recent months, both Shiite and Sunni guerillas have stepped up their military campaigns to drive out the occupation forces. Insurgents are carrying out 700 to 800 attacks against US targets every week. Last month, 73 American soldiers were killed and well over 650 wounded. Eight more soldiers were killed in Baghdad on Monday alone.

Maliki's government is widely regarded by Iraqis as a powerless and corrupt US puppet. The ruling coalition of Shiite parties has failed to live up to its election promises to demand the withdrawal of American troops and improve the nightmarish social conditions.

The *New York Times* reported on September 27 that even Moqtada al-Sadr is now viewed by many Shiites as "too accommodating" to the US. After ending an armed uprising by the Mahdi Army against US forces in 2004, Sadr promised that his movement would not stop seeking to end the occupation. Instead, the Sadrists have become the largest bloc in Maliki's government and hold ministries in his cabinet.

The Bush administration is rapidly coming to the conclusion that the Maliki government is incapable of carrying out its demands above all for a crackdown on the Shiite militias. The consensus in Washington is that brutal repression must be carried out in Shiite working class districts of Baghdad and Basra—no different from that carried out in the past by the Baathist regime.

American hostility to Maliki is magnified by US preparations for military aggression against Iran. All the main Shiite parties in the government have close connections with Iran. In his efforts to bolster local support for his government, Maliki incurred displeasure by criticising the US-backed Israeli invasion of Lebanon.

Diehl's column is another indication that behind the scenes the Bush administration has issued a blunt ultimatum to the Maliki government to follow orders, in particular carry out a bloodbath against its own Shiite base of support, or face the consequences.

The conditions for a coup have already been created. Thousands of extra US troops have been deployed into Baghdad over the past several months, along with Iraqi army units that American commanders consider to be reliable. Candidates to head a government of "national salvation"—that is, a military dictatorship—range from figures such as former interim prime minister Iyad Allawi to senior officers of the US-created Iraqi army.

Last Friday night, the US military pressured Maliki to order an unprecedented curfew in Baghdad. All daytime movement was banned on the streets for 48 hours. The pretext was an alleged plot by Sunni insurgents to attack the heavily fortified Green Zone. Given the tenor of the discussion in Washington, however, it could just as well have been a rehearsal for shutting down the city while "regime change" takes place.



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