

Demands for Iraq “course change” grow louder in Washington

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The tremendous political and military crisis confronting the US occupation of Iraq is plunging the American ruling elite into perplexity and even panic. A broad consensus is developing in Washington that the Bush administration’s policies since March 2003 have produced a debacle, and desperate steps must be taken to protect US interests.

The events last Friday in the southern Iraqi city of Amarah, which British troops just recently handed over to the new Iraqi security forces, can only have deepened the despair in US ruling circles. Hundreds of Shiite Mahdi Army militiamen, loosely associated with the movement headed by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, attacked police stations after police linked to a rival Shiite party arrested the brother of a local leader. Within a matter of hours, the militia had seized the entire city. The takeover was only ended without a major military confrontation because envoys acting on Sadr’s orders were able to convince the militiamen to hand back control to Iraqi army units.

The incident was further proof of the nonsense of the Bush administration’s repeated claims that progress is being made toward consolidating a viable pro-US puppet government in Baghdad. After three-and-a-half years of carnage, Iraq lies in economic and social ruin and 140,000 US troops are still tied down fighting a bloody guerrilla war, while various ethnic or religious-based militias exert real power over large parts of the country. US casualties this month are the highest for the year, fuelling the mass antiwar sentiment among the American people.

The calls in Washington for a change of US policy in Iraq that delivers “stability” are now reaching a crescendo. The *Washington Post* editorialised on October 22 that “the time has come”, declaring, with more than a hint of panic:

“The Iraqi coalition government that Mr. Bush has been counting on to forge political compromises and disarm sectarian militias doesn’t seem to have the strength to carry out either mission. A US-led attempt to pacify Baghdad by concentrating forces in the capital has failed, while contributing to a grievous spike in American casualties. Support for the war is rapidly slipping, in the country and in Congress; a congressionally mandated commission is likely to recommend a new course sometime after next month’s election. Mr. Bush would be wise to act sooner than that: The rapidly deteriorating

situation in Iraq needs to be addressed urgently.”

The “course change” revolves around the demand that the Shiite-dominated government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki sanction a brutal crackdown to disarm the Mahdi Army and other Shiite militias, which are being systematically demonised as the main obstacle to the US agenda. So-called “rogue” elements of the Mahdi Army are being blamed for both the frenzy of sectarian killings taking place across the country and the growing number of attacks on US troops.

Scarcely a day goes by without an article appearing in the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* referring to the US military’s “exasperation”, “doubt” or “frustration” with the Shiite government. The *Times* of October 20 is a case in point. Correspondent John F. Burns wrote: “In recent weeks, some senior officers have voiced growing exasperation at background briefings for reporters, particularly when discussing the ineffectiveness, dithering and corruption, as they have termed it, in the government of Prime Minister Nouri Kamal al-Maliki, and the prime minister’s failure to act effectively on his pledge to rein in the Shiite militias that American commanders now see as the main source of instability.”

Behind all the recriminations against “Shiite militias” is a growing consensus in American ruling circles that the Maliki government is not a viable means of achieving their interests in Iraq. The main conduit for this assessment is the Iraq Study Group, the congressionally-mandated commission headed by Bush family loyalist and former secretary of state James Baker.

The proposals of the Iraq Study Group, revealed in interviews and carefully placed leaks, repudiate the basic policies of Bush administration strategists such as Vice President Dick Cheney and Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

Under Cheney and Rumsfeld’s direction, the US occupation of Iraq set out to shatter the institutions and personnel of Saddam Hussein’s Baathist dictatorship, which rested on police-state repression, a relatively privileged layer of Sunni Arabs and appeals to Iraqi and pan-Arab nationalism. In its place, the Shiite fundamentalists and Kurdish separatists—bitter enemies of the Baathists—were elevated into the key positions of political power.

The Sunni Arab population was alienated and pauperised. The Baath Party was illegalised and the Iraqi army—one of the

main sources of employment and prestige for the Sunni middle class—was disbanded. Thousands of leading Baathist figures were killed or rounded up for torture and humiliation in prisons such as Abu Ghraib.

The US tactics of “shock-and-awe” and “divide-and-rule” inevitably produced an intractable anti-occupation insurgency based in the Sunni population, and civil war against the Shiite-led government. Extremist organisations such as Al Qaeda have been given fertile ground to promote their Wahabbist ideology of vengeance against both the foreign occupiers and Shiites.

Some sections of the Shiite fundamentalists have answered the atrocities against Shiite civilians with their own campaign of murder. Shiite death squads are seeking to both wipe out their opponents and terrorise the Sunni population into bowing down to their rule. A direct US hand in fomenting the violence cannot be ruled out. The ideologues of the Bush administration have repeatedly used the carnage to shout down opponents of the war with the claim that the American troops must remain in Iraq to prevent an even bloodier civil war.

The consequences, however, are disastrous. As many as 100 Iraqis are now killed every day in sectarian attacks. The United Nations estimates that close to one million people have been displaced with more than 360,000—mainly Sunnis—forced from their homes in the eight months since a revered Shiite mosque was blown up in February, allegedly by Sunni extremists. The catastrophic state of the country has prevented any progress toward opening up the country’s oil reserves to American corporations—the unstated, but real motive of the invasion.

The Iraq Study Group’s solution to the chaos is *real politik* at its crudest and most ruthless. With the bipartisan support of leading Democrats, Baker is preparing a report that suggests the US can stabilise Iraq by making overtures to the very Sunni population it has spent the last three-and-a-half years repressing. One of the group’s main proposals is an amnesty for the Sunni insurgency. According to sources of the *London Times*, “feeler discussions” took place over the weekend in Jordan between US officials and representatives of the Islamic Army, one of the main Sunni insurgent groups.

Numerous question marks exist over the viability of the so-called “Baker plan”. Controversially for the Cheney-Rumsfeld faction in the White House, it would require a US retreat—however temporary—from the confrontational stance they have presided over against Iran and Syria. The US needs the regimes in Tehran and Damascus to prevail upon the Iraqi factions they influence. A US settlement with Iran would inevitably raise complex issues regarding American policy toward Israel and provoke hysteria among the most fanatical Zionists.

The immediate obstacle, however, is the resistance among the Shiite parties, particularly elements within the Sadrists movement, to any deal with the Sunni elite. The Sadrists social base consists of millions of working class Shiite Iraqis who are utterly opposed to the US presence in the country and have

bitter memories of Baathist rule. The support Sadr enjoys stems from the fact that he articulates, albeit in a limited fashion, popular demands for an end to foreign military occupation, the right of Iraqis to democratically decide their own future and the maintenance of state control over oil resources.

The Shiite masses will not accept peacefully the “change of course” being formulated by figures like Baker. While Sadr has demonstrated he is prepared to accommodate himself to the US domination over Iraq, he has been unable to disband the Mahdi Army militia. His Shiite supporters, remembering the massacres carried out by the Baathist regime, consider it essential to maintain an armed force that is independent of any government in Baghdad. Maliki is likewise beholden to the Shiite masses.

On August 22, the *World Socialist Web Site* drew attention to the first hints that the Bush administration was plotting to remove the Maliki government if it refused to go along with the US agenda. (See *Is the US planning a coup in Iraq?*) A battle with the Shiite militias could well be the prelude to the imposition of martial law and the establishment of some form of open military dictatorship.

A confrontation between the US military and the Shiite militias is clearly being prepared. Last Monday, Maliki used an interview with *USA Today* to warn of US plans to “destroy an entire neighbourhood”—Sadr City in Baghdad, where Sadr has mass support among the suburb’s two million predominantly Shiite inhabitants and the Mahdi Army has an estimated 10,000 fighters. While there is next to no reportage from the strongholds of the militia, it is inconceivable that thousands of young militiamen in Baghdad, Basra, Najaf, Karbala and dozens of other cities and towns across southern Iraq, have not prepared for battle.

Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have already been killed for the sake of world power and control over oil. An attack on Sadr City would add thousands more to the horrific toll. In the midst of the US election campaign, however, in which the war has become the main issue, no voice of opposition is being raised within the official political establishment to the perspective of escalating the violence in Iraq. Instead, the Democrats are collaborating with the Iraq Study Group and providing a bipartisan agreement that a “change of course” in Iraq requires the repudiation of even the pretence that the US is establishing a “democracy” in the Middle East.



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