

# Baghdad press conference outlines plans for intensified US war

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The press conference delivered last night in Baghdad by US ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad and commanding US General George Casey spelt out the main lines of the Iraq “change of course” formulated in the White House and Pentagon. Over the coming weeks and months, the Bush administration intends to unleash a reckless intensification of violence in an attempt to salvage US interests from the catastrophe it now confronts.

The utter ruin to which Iraq has been reduced over the past three-and-a-half years was symbolised in the course of the conference. As Khalilzad presented what he called the “strategy and plans for success in Iraq”, a power cut across Baghdad plunged the press room into darkness for close to four minutes. The US occupation is incapable of guaranteeing electricity to even its own heavily fortified headquarters. Iraqis are struggling to cope with just two or three hours of power per day, fuel shortages and mass unemployment. Thousands are dying due to the bloody civil war the US invasion has fuelled between rival Sunni and Shiite factions.

The basic policy of the Bush administration to secure US interests in Iraq has been “divide-and-rule”. Since 2003, the US has ruthlessly suppressed the Sunni Arab population that formed the main social base of Saddam Hussein’s Baathist regime. The Iraqi governments formed in Baghdad since the invasion have been dominated by Shiite fundamentalist and Kurdish nationalist parties, which were given power and privilege in exchange for their collaboration with the occupation. The new constitution adopted last year was written to allow Shiite and Kurdish regional governments in the south and north of the country to assume control over Iraq’s oil reserves and oversee their sell-off to American-favoured transnational energy companies.

The result has been an intractable Baathist and Sunni insurgency against both the occupation and the Iraqi government, which has escalated into a murderous sectarian conflict between Sunni and Shiite extremists. An estimated 655,000 Iraqis are dead and over one million turned into refugees. The chaos across the country is tying down 140,000 US troops and has prevented any coherent attempt to open up Iraq’s oil industry.

Khalilzad last night outlined what amounts to a tactical reversal of US policy. The Bush administration is largely

adopting the calls by powerful sections of the American establishment for a deal with the Baathists in order to achieve “stability”. In opposition to the pro-Shiite and Kurdish plan for regionalism in the existing constitution—which Khalilzad played a major role in writing—he is now demanding an “oil law that will share the profits of Iraq’s resources in a way that unites the country”, “amending the constitution” and “reforming the de-Baathification commission to transform it into an accountability and reconciliation program”.

Khalilzad defined “reconciliation” as “persuading Sunni insurgents to lay down their arms”. For that to occur, major political concessions will have to be given to the Sunni elite, which at least restores a significant degree of their power and privilege. One possible overture hinted at in the American media is the recall of the officer caste of the former Iraqi Army, which was completely disbanded and marginalised after the US invasion in 2003.

The terminology used by General Casey when describing the “insurgents” underscored the shift being made. For years, the US military has lumped together all resistance supporters in Iraq as “terrorists” or absurdly branded them “anti-Iraqi forces”. Last night, however, Casey drew a distinction between Sunni religious extremists in organisations like Al Qaeda, and the Baathist guerillas, which he described as “insurgents that primarily fight us and who claim to be the honourable resistance to foreign occupation in Iraq”.

While suggesting that an amnesty will be offered to Baathist insurgents, Casey made clear the US wants to destroy the Shiite Mahdi Army militia, which is maintained in Baghdad and southern Iraq by the movement of anti-occupation cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. His supporters are the largest Shiite faction in the present government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Without directly naming the Mahdi Army, he declared that “death squads and more militant illegal armed groups” were “attacking and murdering civilians” and causing “security problems in the central and southern parts of the country”.

Declaring that an “integrated political-military effort” was needed against the militias, Casey stressed the Bush administration was pressuring the Maliki government to sanction a crackdown. Over the past two months, there have been repeated hints that both Washington and Sunni parties in

Iraq are plotting a coup by elements within the new Iraqi military if Maliki continues to refuse to sanction a bloodbath against the Mahdi Army.

There is a logic to the simultaneous calls for reconciliation with the Sunni insurgents and military action against the Mahdi Army. The Sadrist movement draws its support from millions of Shiite working class and urban poor Iraqis, especially in the Baghdad suburb of Sadr City, who suffered brutal repression under the Hussein regime. They would bitterly oppose any return to positions of power by elements of the Baathist Party establishment. Such a move would only amplify the mass opposition that exists among the Shiite masses toward the US occupation and strengthen the hand of the most radical elements who advocate armed struggle.

A US-negotiated reconciliation with the Sunni insurgency would require shattering the armed Shiite militias. A feature in the latest issue of *Time* magazine by its Baghdad-based correspondent Aparisim Ghosh bluntly explained the conclusion being drawn in US political and military circles. Dovetailing with most of what was outlined by Khalilzad and Casey, *Time* defined the ways of preventing “Iraq from getting worse” as a purge of supporters of the Shiite parties from the new Iraqi security forces, steps to “deal with Moqtada al-Sadr” and efforts to “bring the Sunnis back”.

Referring to the Sadrists, Ghosh wrote: “In public, the US military says al-Sadr—who controls a sizeable block in the parliament—is a major political figure and must be treated accordingly ... In private, however, American commanders say they would like the shackles taken off just long enough to deliver some blows against the Mahdi Army. It wouldn’t be simple: a full-frontal assault on heavily-populated Sadr City isn’t a smart option ... but the US may still be able to do some good by hacking away at those elements of the Mahdi Army responsible for the worst sectarian atrocities and criminal activities”.

At the Baghdad press conference, Casey foreshadowed an assault on Sadr City. He declared the US military objectives in the capital to be clearing neighbourhoods of alleged perpetrators of sectarian violence and indicated he may request additional troops to carry out what would be one of the bloodiest operations of the Iraq war.

US occupation forces are already raiding the homes and offices of senior leaders of the Mahdi Army in preparation for a major offensive. The Kuwait newsagency KUNA reported that on Monday, US troops smashed into the Mahdi Army office in Holla, the capital of Babel province in Iraq’s south. On the same day, the home of a militia leader in Diwaniya province was raided.

Last Thursday, US troops arrested a Mahdi Army commander in Hindiya, a town near the city of Karbala, and raided a Shiite mosque in Baghdad controlled by the Sadrist movement. At least one Iraqi was shot dead in the raid and two others were dragged away. The detentions came just 24 hours after Maliki

personally intervened to order the US military to release a prominent Sadrist leader, Mazen al-Saedi, whom they had seized last week. The raids may well be a conscious attempt to provoke the Sadrist armed wing into an open confrontation to justify a US onslaught.

The implications of the Bush administration plans go far beyond a horrific bloodbath in Baghdad, however. Ominously, while Khalilzad stated that the US would reach out to neighbouring Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Jordan for help in achieving a new political arrangement in Iraq, he labelled Syria and Iran as among the forces “at work to keep us and the Iraqis from succeeding”.

Casey declared the two states were “providing support to the different extremists and terrorist groups operating inside Iraq”. The remarks suggest the Bush administration has not as yet embraced the calls by US figures such as Iraq Study Group head James Baker for overtures toward Syria and Iran. Its policy remains “regime change” in Damascus and Tehran, as part of ambitions to extend US domination over the resources and territory of the Middle East.

White House spokesman Tony Snow declared last week that the discussions taking place over the situation in Iraq “certainly doesn’t change our diplomatic stance toward either [Syria or Iran]”.

For its part, the Iranian Shiite theocracy, which fought a bloody eight-year war against Baathist Iraq, has little incentive to support the US agenda unless it is offered major concessions from Washington over issues such as nuclear power and trade sanctions. Any crackdown on the Shiite militias would most likely lead to the collapse of the Shiite-dominated Iraqi government and its replacement with a regime hostile to Tehran.

The Bush administration’s “change of course” unveiled last night will not only cost thousands more Iraqi and American lives, but could well trigger an escalation of already volatile regional tensions.



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