

Amidst reports of US coup preparations in Iraq

Prime Minister Maliki vents grievances against Washington

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Mounting tensions between the Bush administration and Washington's hand-picked head of government in Baghdad, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, came to a head at a meeting last Friday between Maliki and the US ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad.

In response to increasing US pressure for a crackdown on Shia militias hostile to the American occupation and public criticisms of Maliki by American military commanders and politicians, the prime minister complained that Khalilzad and the Bush administration were undermining the official fiction that he was the sovereign head of a democratic government.

"I'm a friend to the United States, but not America's man in Iraq," Maliki told Khalilzad, according to Hassan Senaid, one of Maliki's advisors.

Maliki's comments were preceded by an October 24 press conference held in Baghdad's Green Zone by Khalilzad and the commander of US forces in Iraq, General George Casey. Khalilzad announced that an agreement had been reached with the Iraqi government on a timetable for the implementation of measures to establish stability in Iraq.

The US is demanding that Maliki reach an accommodation on the division of oil revenues and other issues with representatives of the Sunni elite, including Baathists associated with the deposed regime of Saddam Hussein, and that he support American plans to attack the stronghold of the Mahdi Army militia, led by Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, in Baghdad's teeming Shia district of Sadr City.

Maliki responded to the Khalilzad-Casey press conference by declaring that the Iraqi government "is a government of the people's will, and no one has the right to set a timetable for it." He said his own government had not been involved in any negotiations on a timetable, and

that "only the people who elected the government have the right to make time limitations or amendments."

These comments are only the latest indication of conflicts between the Maliki government and the US occupiers. During the US-backed Israeli attack on Lebanon this summer, Maliki denounced the Israeli aggression and later held a well-publicized meeting with Iranian President Ahmadinejad in Tehran.

On October 13, Maliki gave an interview to *USA Today* in which he made clear his opposition to US preparations for a bloody assault on Sadr City, saying, "[T]he way the multinational forces are thinking of confronting this issue will destroy an entire neighborhood."

On October 25, the US staged a raid on Sadr City, provoking an angry response from Maliki, who demanded—and obtained—the release of a top Sadr aide seized by American forces.

While the Bush administration issued statements affirming its confidence in Maliki, behind the scenes there are active preparations for a coup to install a military government pledged to carry out Washington's diktats.

United Press International (UPI), which is owned by the publishers of the right-wing *Washington Times*, published a report on October 23, one day before the press conference by Khalilzad and Casey, headlined "Coups Against Maliki Reported in the Making." The article said, "Iraqi army officers are reportedly planning to stage a military coup with US help to oust the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki." Such a coup would be engineered "in case the efforts of Maliki's government to restore order reached a dead end."

Citing "Cairo-based Iraqi and Arab sources," the UPI wrote that "several Iraqi officers" had visited Washington recently "for talks with US officials on plans for replacing Maliki's administration by a 'national salvation'

government.”

The article continued, “Among the prominent [Iraqi] officers were the deputy chief of staff, a Muslim Shiite, the intelligence chief, a Sunni, and the commander of the air force, a Kurd. It is believed the three would constitute the nucleus of the next government after the army takes over power.

“The proposed plan, according to the source, stipulates that the new Iraqi army, with the assistance of US forces, will take control of power, suspend the constitution, dissolve parliament and form a new government. The military will also take direct control of the various provinces and the administration after imposing a state of emergency.

“An Arab source also told UPI that certain Arab countries were informed of the plan and requested to offer their help in convincing the former leaders of the deposed Baath Party regime residing in their countries to refrain from obstructing the move and stop violence perpetrated by the party in Iraq. In return, they will be invited to participate in the government at a later stage.”

The UPI article is only the most detailed of numerous media reports of a possible US-engineered coup. Whether or not a coup is carried out, reports of such preparations are being floated to increase US pressure on Maliki to carry out the demands of the American military.

In demanding that Maliki endorse an assault on the Shia militias, the US is calling on him to attack a major political prop of his highly unstable regime. The Iraqi prime minister, a leader of the Shiite Islamic Dawa Party, is dependent within Iraq on the Shia militias, and in particular on Sadr, who has a wide base of support within the Shia population in Baghdad and the south of the country.

There is a strong element of farce in the protests of Maliki. He is, after all, a US puppet who was maneuvered into his current position by Khalilzad himself.

Washington considered Maliki to be more pliable than the candidate initially selected by the Dawa Party, party head Ibrahim al-Jaafari. Maliki knows very well that his position is entirely dependent on continued support from the US—that he is, in fact, “America’s man in Iraq.” His regime was never intended by the US to be a step toward democracy, but rather a mechanism for ensuring US control over Iraq’s oil resources and the consolidation of American military and political hegemony in the region.

But in an attempt to save his government—and very likely his head—Maliki is making use of the pretext for the ongoing American occupation given out by the Bush

administration after the collapse of the weapons of mass destruction and Iraq-Al Qaeda lies: that Maliki is the head of a sovereign and democratically elected government, the product and symbol of Washington’s democratizing mission in Iraq, who must be defended against the “terrorist” enemies of democracy, i.e., the Iraqis who are resisting American military domination.

While the US has begun dropping talk of “democracy” as a goal for Iraq, substituting instead “stability,” the Bush administration has refrained from any direct moves against Maliki in the run-up to the November 7 US elections. Such a move, accompanied by a US-led assault on Sadr’s militia, is fraught with explosive political and military consequences, including a possible uprising of the Shia population in Iraq and a further erosion in already plummeting domestic support for the occupation.

On Saturday, Bush held a videoconference with Maliki in an effort to diffuse tensions and affirm US support for the prime minister.

Nevertheless, there are many signs that a major escalation of US military violence in Iraq, and particularly in Baghdad, is being prepared, with or without Maliki, for the period following next week’s elections, and that it will have the bipartisan support of the Democratic as well as the Republican Party, whatever the outcome of the US vote. The American military has already begun incursions into Sadr City on the pretext of searching for a missing US soldier.

The American ruling elite is concerned about the power of the Shia militias for two reasons. First, there is enormous opposition among the Shia masses to the US occupation. Second, these groups have close ties to the Iranian regime.

By eliminating the Baathist government, the US has created a power vacuum for Iran to fill, even as the US pursues a parallel strategy of undermining Iran and preparing future military action against that country. Any move against Iran, however, would require the US to create a new client regime based on a different combination of political and religio-ethnic forces within Iraq.



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