

Relations between US and Iraqi government at breaking point

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Tensions between the US and Iraqi governments further intensified this week. In an unprecedented action, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki issued a press release on Tuesday afternoon stating that he had “ordered” the US military to end the cordon it had maintained around Sadr City for close to seven days, ostensibly as part of a search for an American soldier who was allegedly abducted by Shiite militants. Sadr City, a suburb of Baghdad, is the stronghold of the Shiite movement headed by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and its Madhi Army militia.

There appears to be little doubt that Maliki issued his statement without notifying the American occupation forces beforehand. The *New York Times* reported that US officials maintained “hours of silence on the matter” before finally declaring that the order was a joint US-Iraqi decision between Maliki, US ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad and General George Casey. Earlier, however, a US military spokesman could not conceal his surprise when questioned by the *Times*. He said American commanders had the press release and were “reviewing how best to address these concerns”.

Maliki declared the order was necessary to “open roads and ease traffic”. The real reason is the extreme level of tension that is building up in Iraq’s Shiite population. For months now, the Bush administration has been making constant demands that the Maliki government, which is dominated by the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) coalition of Shiite parties, sanction a bloody assault on Sadr City to “disarm” the Mahdi Army. Maliki has repeatedly refused to do so.

The Sadrist movement is the largest faction within the UIA. An attack against it would shatter the coalition and seriously undermine the government. Moreover, the Mahdi Army has popular support among the Shiite masses, who, after enduring decades of repression at the hands of the Baathist regime, consider it essential to maintain an armed force that is independent of any government in Baghdad. In Sadr City, the militia is viewed as the only reliable means of defence against both Sunni extremists and US occupation forces, whose presence is bitterly opposed by the predominantly working class and poor population of the district.

As a consequence of Maliki’s refusal to turn on the Sadrists, the US and Iraqi media is rife with speculation that the Bush

administration is plotting a coup to install some form of military junta, which would give the green light for an offensive against the Shiite militia. In the streets of Sadr City and other largely Shiite cities, such as Najaf, Kufa, Karbala, Amarah and Basra, US actions have provoked fierce opposition.

The US roadblocks and checkpoints thrown up over every major route in and out of Sadr City last week had raised tensions to a fever-pitch. On Monday, reflecting the pressure from below for an open challenge to the actions of the US military, Moqtada al-Sadr issued a statement threatening that “if this siege continues for long, we will resort to actions which I will have no choice but to take”. He denounced Iraqi members of parliament for their silence.

On Tuesday, the seventh day of the “siege”, the Sadrist movement declared an indefinite general strike in protest. The entire suburb of 2.5 million people shut down, with militiamen openly patrolling the streets. Maliki’s intervention reflected deep concern within the government that a strike movement would rapidly snowball as Iraqis vented their anger against the occupation and appalling social conditions. A Sadrist spokesman, Jalil Nouri, told Associated Press: “If they had not lifted the siege, our strike would have spread to the rest of Baghdad tomorrow and the whole of Iraq the next day.”

Maliki’s actions have fuelled the debate in Washington over the future of his government. There is a growing consensus in the Bush administration, the media and among Republicans and Democrats that the Shiite-dominated government is not a viable means for realising US ambitions in Iraq. All the empty talk about “democracy” in Iraq has been shelved amid intense frustration at Maliki’s failure to follow US dictates for reconciliation with the Sunni elites and a crack down on Shiite militias.

Leading Democrat Senator Hillary Clinton denounced the Maliki government in a speech to the Council on Foreign Relations on Tuesday for failing to create the conditions for a political settlement. “American credibility is held hostage by an Iraqi government that will not fulfil its pledge to seek a political resolution of the rights and roles of the Sunni minority and to determine how oil revenue is allocated,” she said.

There is a growing recognition in Washington that the Iraqi

government is incapable of implementing the type of “political settlement” being proposed by the US. To reach a “reconciliation” with the “Sunni minority” means handing back to the former Baathist elites at least some of the power they enjoyed under the regime of Saddam Hussein. Above all, it means reversing plans for significant regional autonomy to the Kurdish north and Shiite south, including control over the huge oil reserves in those areas.

For the Shiite parties, these plans are anathema. Even if the Shiite leaders reached a power-sharing accommodation with their Sunni counterparts to end the insurgency, there is no guarantee that masses of ordinary working people would accept such a deal. The reinstallation of Baathist generals, police and bureaucrats into positions of power to suppress opposition to the US occupation would inevitably generate widespread anger and hostility. That is why calls for “reconciliation” go hand in hand with US demands for a bloody settling of accounts with the Mahdi Army and its working class base in Sadr City.

The Maliki government also creates difficulties for Washington’s broader plans in the Middle East. All the ruling Shiite parties have close connections to Iran, which is the target of US plans for “regime change”. Any US aggression against Tehran would provoke opposition among the Shiite masses in Iraq, leading to further instability and confrontations with the US-led occupation. Former US secretary of state James Baker, who heads the top-level Iraqi Study Group examining options in Iraq, has proposed enlisting Iranian support for a settlement in Iraq. But there is no guarantee that the Bush administration could or would attempt such a deal.

Clinton’s comments reflect bipartisan agreement that the regime in Baghdad has to go. As she told the Council of Foreign Affairs: “In political terms, we have finally reached the point of complete absurdity. The [US] administration announces that it will propose timetables or benchmarks, and the Iraqi prime minister denounces them.” This statement amounts to a pledge in advance of Democrat support for any move to oust Maliki.

It would not be the first time that US imperialism has removed one of its own puppets. Yesterday marked the 43rd anniversary of the US-backed coup against South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem. While completely loyal to Washington, Diem’s autocratic methods had provoked popular opposition and undermined US efforts to strengthen the South Vietnamese army in the civil war against the National Liberation Front.

On November 1, 1963, rebel army units marched on the presidential palace in Saigon. Diem, who escaped, rang the US ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, and was reassured that the US had no hand in the coup. A few hours later, Diem surrendered, only to be shot dead along with his notorious brother Ngo Dinh Nhu and replaced by a junta.

Now there is an increasingly open discussion in US ruling circles of the type of regime required in Baghdad. Dispensing

with the nominally elected Maliki government and a turn to sections of the Baathist elite can only mean one thing: the establishment of a US-backed junta resting on the security forces and state bureaucracy. Such a formation would not be dissimilar from the Hussein dictatorship, from which the US claimed to be “liberating” the Iraqi people.

Considering US options in Iraq, Eliot Cohen wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* on October 20 that the “most plausible” was “a coup which we quietly endorse”. Cohen is associated with the American Enterprise Institute, the right-wing thinktank that promoted the invasion of Iraq as the first step to “democracy” throughout the Middle East. He has now concluded that “a junta of military modernisers might be the only hope of a country whose democratic culture is weak, whose politicians are either corrupt or incapable”.

Despite Bush’s reassurances of support to Maliki, the open breach between the US administration and the Iraqi government has been evident for weeks. In the midst of this standoff, US National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley arrived unannounced in Baghdad for discussions with Maliki. Hadley clearly delivered a message to the prime minister that changes were required. But the choice of the national security adviser as messenger raises questions about to whom else he spoke and what plans were discussed.

In Baghdad, discussion of “regime change” is even more open. The *New York Times* commented in an article on Tuesday: “Iraqi newspapers have adopted the theme of a government change, speculating on the possible composition of a ‘national salvation government’, backed by the United States, that would wrest power from the Shiite alliance that chose Mr Maliki for prime minister. Iraqi officials have said that Mr Maliki has been deeply shaken by rumours that he might be forced from office by year’s end.”

The corollary of any coup against Maliki would be a bloody crackdown against anti-US opposition, particularly the Shiite masses of Sadr City.



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