

# As Hussein sentenced to death, US pushes to rehabilitate his functionaries

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8 November 2006

Twenty-four hours after Saddam Hussein was sentenced to death for crimes committed against the Iraqi people during his rule, the US-created De-Baathification Commission proposed that over 28,000 mid-level functionaries of Hussein's regime be permitted to return to positions in the Iraqi state apparatus. The head of the commission, Shiite politician Ali al-Lami, told the media: "We are going to deliver these proposals to parliament in the next few days."

The Baath Party—whose membership of 1.5 million was at least 75 percent comprised of Sunni Arabs—was declared illegal shortly after the US invasion in 2003 and more than 30,000 top Baathist officials were barred from holding any government post. The De-Baathification Commission draft law proposes reducing that number to just 1,500.

The policy is a key element of the "course correction" being pushed by Washington: a deal with sections of the Sunni elite to undermine the largely Sunni insurgency at the expense of the Shiite fundamentalist parties that dominate the current US puppet government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. The legislation would rehabilitate many of the people who directed the day-to-day operations of the Baathist state.

Right at the point when the Hussein is sentenced to hang in order to meet Bush's immediate domestic political needs, the White House is attempting to resurrect the very officials on which his dictatorial regime rested. The US purpose is similar to that of Hussein: to violently suppress the opposition to its rule over Iraq.

The tactical shift toward former Baathists and the Sunni elite was outlined on October 24 by US ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad and General George Casey, and further elaborated by Bush himself at a press conference several days later. As well as the rehabilitation of Baathist officials, the US is pressing for an amnesty offer to a significant element of the Sunni insurgents fighting a guerilla war against the American military.

US State Department official David Satterfield confirmed last month that the Bush administration has been involved in discussions with figures among Sunni insurgent leaders. He

told an October 26 press conference: "We are in contact, as we have stated, with those who purport to speak for or represent the insurgency, insurgents, those involved in the insurgency. We are in touch with them for the purpose of seeing whether or not in fact they are credibly able to deliver an end to violence, whether in fact they are able and willing and interested in ending the violence and coming into the political process."

The reversal of de-Baathification is one of the core parts of a deal. In exchange for an end to the fighting, the US occupation is offering a share of the power and privileges of office. Monday's announcement was hailed by Ammar Wahih, a spokesman for the largest legal Sunni organisation, the Iraqi Islamic Party, as a decision that "could move the country toward stability and could be the way to open bridges between the resistance and the Americans".

The Bush administration's attitude toward the predominantly Sunni Baathist establishment has gone through several shifts over the past three-and-a-half years. The first months of the occupation were marked by their brutal persecution. The army was disbanded and 30,000 officials, as well as the entire military officer corp from the rank of colonel up, were banned from holding positions in the new state.

Bush denounced the insurgency as the product of "Baathist remnants" as well as Al Qaeda and "foreign terrorists". Former Baathists were rounded up in their thousands and many subjected to abuse and torture in prisons such as Abu Ghraib. The US had no plan for the occupation other than that "shock-and-awe" would cow the Iraqi people into submitting.

The destruction of the Baathist state, however, and the attempt to replace it with a puppet regime based on sectarian Shiite and Kurdish parties, has produced a military and political catastrophe for US imperialist interests. As well as an entrenched insurgency against American forces by both Sunni and Shiite opponents of the occupation, it has inevitably led to sectarian massacres.

The violence has produced an escalating civil war after the

destruction of the Shiite Al-Askariya mosque on February 22, 2006. Shiite militiamen unleashed a pogrom against Sunnis. Tens of thousands of Sunnis and Shiites have been murdered in the ongoing reprisal killings, and hundreds of thousands forced to flee their homes.

The carnage has shattered the Bush administration's claims to have brought "democracy" to Iraq and its plans to open up the country's oil reserves and establish long-term military bases. Instead, the economy is in utter ruin, sectarian slaughter rages in Baghdad and central Iraq, and tens of thousands of US troops are still tied down fighting against Sunni Arab guerillas. A large proportion of the US-created new Iraqi army and police are loyal to Shiite and Kurdish political parties rather than the Iraqi government.

The disastrous state of affairs produced by the policies of the Bush administration lies at the heart of the calls for a "change of course" by the bipartisan Iraq Study Group headed by Republican powerbroker James Baker III and other figures within the American establishment.

The emerging consensus is that US interests would be best served by the re-establishment of autocratic rule in Baghdad, not fundamentally dissimilar to that of Hussein's. Over the past months, there has been a constant stream of leaks indicating that the Bush administration is plotting to replace Maliki's government with a "national salvation" military junta.

The current US administration is reaching similar conclusions to Bush's father's during the Gulf War of 1990-91. At that time, President Bush senior decided to leave the Hussein police-state in place as the best mechanism for suppressing the complex democratic, national and social antagonisms that exist within Iraq and the Middle East. The present policy is to try a rebuild such a regime, without Hussein, for the same purposes.

The necessary corollary is a brutal crackdown against militias maintained by the main Shiite parties in Maliki's government, particularly the Mahdi Army militia of the Shiite movement led by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and, to a lesser extent, the Badr Brigade militia of the Iranian-linked Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI).

The destruction of the Shiite militias is driven by two main considerations in Washington.

Firstly, any return of prominent Baathists will be bitterly resented by the Shiite masses who suffered decades of bloody repression at the hands of the Baathist state. The demands for a crackdown, particularly on the Mahdi militia in the large working class Shiite suburbs of Baghdad, are aimed at suppressing any popular opposition to this shift.

Secondly, the Bush administration has also put "regime change" in Iran on the agenda. In any confrontation with Iran, the Baathists, who waged a bloody war against Iran

from 1980-1988, would be far more reliable allies than the various Shiite parties, all of which have close links to Tehran.

Some of the crudest arguments for a "change of course" in Iraq have been authored by Ralph Peters, an ardent advocate of the 2003 invasion and member of the Project for a New American Century. On October 26, he wrote an article headlined "Kill Moqtada Now" for the *New York Post*, in which he declared:

"The first thing we need to do is kill Moqtada al-Sadr, who's now a greater threat to our strategic goals than Osama bin Laden.... We must kill—not capture—Moqtada, then kill every gunman who comes out in the streets to avenge him.... The holier-than-thou response is predictable: 'We can't kill our way out of this situation!' Well boo-hoo. Friendly persuasion and billions of dollars haven't done the job. Give therapeutic violence a chance."

Peters followed up his call for the murder of al-Sadr with a column on November 1, in which he wrote: "In the coming months, we may find the only hope of restoring order is a military government. It sounds repellent, but a US-backed coup may be the only alternative to endless anarchy. Arabs still can't govern themselves democratically. That's the appalling lesson of our Iraqi experiment. A military regime *might* be capable of establishing order and protecting the common people."

The decision to reverse de-Baathification is a sign that Prime Minister Maliki has ditched his previous objections in a desperate effort to convince the Bush administration that the Shiite parties are prepared to negotiate a new power-sharing arrangement. The first casualty of any such deal may well be thousands of young Shiite militiamen.

The announcement again underscores the utter hypocrisy of the Hussein verdict. He has been sentenced to death for the 1982 killing of 148 Shiite opponents of his regime at the very point where Washington is plotting to incorporate thousands of Baathist functionaries into its puppet state and instigate a massacre of Shiite opponents of the US occupation.



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