

Bush visits Middle East to intensify Iraq war

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The thrust of today's talks in Jordan between George Bush and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is clear in advance. Bush, accompanied by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, will insist that the Iraqi leader bow down to US demands for a bloody crackdown against the largest faction in his own government, the anti-occupation Sadrist movement headed by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and its Mahdi Army militia. An unnamed senior US official bluntly told the *New York Times*: "It's decision time and everybody knows it."

On the eve of the talks, the justification for an attack on the Sadrists was published on the front page of Tuesday's *New York Times*. According to senior correspondents Michael Gordon and Dexter Filkins, an anonymous "senior intelligence official" leaked allegations that up to 2,000 Mahdi Army fighters have been trained in southern Lebanon by Hezbollah—the Lebanese Shiite movement classified as a "terrorist organisation" by Washington.

Iran, the official said, "has facilitated the link between Hezbollah and the Shiite militias in Iraq" and "Syrian officials have also cooperated," assisting the Sadrists to cross into Lebanon through Syrian territory. The unnamed official declared: "There seems to have been a strategic decision taken sometime over late winter or early spring by Damascus, Tehran, along with their partners in Lebanese Hezbollah, to provide more support to Sadr to increase pressure on the US."

The lurid claim of a Sadrist-Hezbollah-Syria-Iran axis—which is not supported by any evidence and smacks of a planted story by the White House or the Pentagon—plays directly into the hands of Bush administration powerbrokers such as Vice President Dick Cheney who have always viewed the Iraq war as the prelude to "regime change" in Damascus and Tehran.

The article directly cuts across the Iraq Study Group headed by former Secretary of State James Baker. Its

report, due out next month, has been widely predicted to recommend that the US request the assistance of Iran and Syria to end the fratricidal civil war that is now raging in Iraq. It was published just hours after Iraqi President Jalal Talabani flew into Tehran for what were viewed as preliminary talks with the Iranian regime.

In Iraq, the allegations against the Sadrists can be used to justify a long-planned tactical shift. There have been hints throughout the year that the White House wants to replace the Shiite-dominated Iraqi government in Baghdad with some type of Baathist-style military regime. In exchange for an amnesty and the prospect of a return to power and privilege, the Sunni Arab elite would be expected to collaborate with American aggression against Syria and Iran and work alongside US forces in brutally crushing any element of the Sunni insurgency that refuses to lay down its arms.

The Sadrist movement, with its millions of Shiite working class and urban poor supporters in Baghdad and across southern Iraq, is viewed by the Bush administration as the main obstacle to their agenda. Sadr has resisted demands for "reconciliation" with the previous Baathist establishment. His organisation continues to demand a timetable for an end to the US occupation and insist on Iraq's right to determine how its oil resources are exploited.

Moreover, in the event of a clash with Shiite Iran, the prospect of the Mahdi Army launching attacks on US forces in Iraq is considered a real and dangerous threat. According to intelligence officials cited in the *Washington Post* on Tuesday, the Mahdi Army now consists of between 40,000 and 60,000 fighters.

The demands in American ruling circles for a change of course in Iraq that brings the country under some degree of US control have reached a fever pitch. More than 3,700 Iraqis were killed during October in Sunni-Shiite fighting. Hundreds more have died over the last week in savage Sunni bombings and reprisals by Shiite

militia. The country is on the brink of economic, social and political disintegration, while none of the US objectives in Iraq have been realised.

In the western Anbar province, where the Sunni resistance is most entrenched, the *Washington Post* revealed this week that a US military report had declared in August that “the social and political situation has deteriorated to the point” where American and Iraqi forces “are no longer capable of militarily defeating the insurgency”. The carnage taking place every day and the constant American casualties are fueling mass antiwar sentiment in the US and calls for the withdrawal of troops. Domestic political tensions and recriminations are steadily rising.

The Bush administration, however, is making clear it is not prepared to adopt a “course change” that involves any concessions to Iran or Syria or a retreat from the perspective of US domination in the Middle East. On Saturday, Vice President Dick Cheney flew into Saudi Arabia. While refusing to speak with Tehran or Damascus, the White House is enlisting the support of the Saudi monarchy and other Arab states behind the ultimatum that will be delivered by Bush to Maliki.

The *New York Times* reported on the weekend: “Specifically, the United States wants Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan to work to drive a wedge between the Iraqi prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, and the anti-American Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, whose Mahdi Army has been behind many of the Shiite reprisal attacks in Iraq, a senior administration official said. That would require getting the predominantly Sunni Arab nations to work to get moderate Sunni Iraqis to support Mr Maliki, a Shiite. That would theoretically give Mr Maliki the strength to take on Mr Sadr’s Shiite militias.”

If Maliki refuses to sanction the massacre of the Sadrists, the Bush administration is prepared to move against him. Senior Republican Senator Trent Lott told Fox News on Sunday: “There are problems with him [Maliki]. He’s going to have to decide whether he’s going to really try to control his militia groups... I don’t know whether the government is going to be able to survive if the circumstances don’t change there... I think we are going to have to be very aggressive and specific with him... if he doesn’t show real leadership... if in fact he becomes part of the problem, we’re going to have to make some tough decisions. Do we go in, try

and do it for them?”

Just three weeks after the November 7 congressional election produced an unambiguous repudiation of the Republican Party and a vote for an end to the war, a new and even bloodier stage of the Iraq conflict is looming. Far from a withdrawal of US forces from Iraq, the most likely scenario is a substantial increase in American troop numbers to carry out operations to “stabilise” in Baghdad and other cities. Bush used a press conference in Latvia yesterday to declare: “I’m not going to pull the troops off the battlefield before the mission is complete.”

The open contempt for the democratic will of the American people being displayed by the Bush White House is only possible because of the essential agreement of the Democrats and the media establishment with its agenda. Whatever tactical differences have been expressed over the conduct of the Iraq war, they are just as committed to maintaining US troops in Iraq and completing the “mission” in the Middle East—US economic and military control over the region’s territory and oil resources.



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