

Bush to deliver ultimatum to Iraqi prime minister at Jordan summit

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The planned meeting between US President Bush and Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki in the Jordanian capital of Amman failed to go ahead yesterday, after a secret White House memo detailing US plans for Iraq, and critical of Maliki, was leaked to the *New York Times*.

The memo drawn up by Bush's National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley on November 8 was undoubtedly leaked deliberately so as to maximise the pressure on Maliki before meeting Bush. The document is framed as a set of proposals to assist the prime minister to reorganise his government and take action to end the spiralling sectarian conflict in Iraq. But the obvious subtext is that Iraq's future is decided in Washington, not Baghdad, and that the US intends to proceed with its plans—with or without Maliki.

Bush and his advisers have flown to Jordan, not for a collaborative meeting with the leader of a sovereign country, but to deliver an ultimatum to their stooge Maliki. At the top of their list of demands is for Maliki to sanction a crackdown against the Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and his Madhi army. Among its “steps Maliki could take,” the Hadley memo calls for the prime minister to “bring his political strategy” with Sadr “to closure and to bring to justice any JAM [Mahdi Army] actors that do not eschew violence”.

As the Bush administration is well aware, such a step by Maliki risks political suicide. The Sadrists form a large parliamentary bloc in Maliki's Shiite coalition and are politically crucial to his government maintaining support among broad layers of the Shiite poor who are deeply hostile to the US occupation. Last weekend, Maliki visited Baghdad's Shiite working class neighbourhood of Sadr City to express his sympathy for the victims of a devastating series of car bombs, only to be denounced as “a coward” and “a collaborator”.

Fearing the political ramifications for his government, Maliki has previously baulked at repeated US demands

for a military offensive into Sadr City and other Madhi Army strongholds. As the Hadley document notes: “The above approach may prove difficult to execute even if Maliki has the right intentions. He may simply not have the political and security capabilities to take such steps, which risk alienating his Sadrist political base and require a greater number of more reliable forces. Pushing Maliki to take these steps without augmenting his capabilities could force him to failure...”

The prospect of the collapse of the Maliki government has not deterred the Bush administration, which has already begun to implement aspects of Hadley's proposals. These include enlisting the support of the Sunni ruling elites in Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt to pressure their counterparts in Iraq to back Maliki if he agrees to unleash the military against the Sadrist movement. The situation in Iraq was at the top of the agenda when Vice President Dick Cheney flew to Saudi Arabia for consultations with King Abdullah.

The US military is already preparing for a bloody showdown with the Mahdi Army in Sadr City through a series of probing operations and a build up of American troops in Baghdad. The Pentagon announced plans yesterday to send another 3,500 soldiers to the capital. According to an ABC report, it is considering the option of boosting overall American troop levels in Iraq by two to five brigades—that is, by 7,000 to 18,000 troops.

The American media is functioning as the propaganda arm for the bloodbath being prepared in Baghdad. On Tuesday, the *New York Times* published an unsubstantiated front-page article alleging that the Mahdi Army militiamen were being trained in Lebanon by Hezbollah with the assistance of Iran and Syria. As well as vilifying al-Sadr and his supporters, the article serves to undercut calls within Washington for the Bush administration to open up a dialogue with Syria and Iran.

The latest issue of *Newsweek* magazine features a cover

labelling al-Sadr as “The Most Dangerous Man in Iraq”. Its story entitled, “How al-Sadr may control US fate in Iraq,” makes clear that the Bush administration and the Pentagon regard the Mahdi Army as its number one enemy. The article likens al-Sadr to a Mafia don, compares his “thugs” to the anti-US Taliban militias in Afghanistan and blames the Madhi army for the escalating civil war between a myriad of competing militias.

It is a familiar modus operandi: the American media is promoting al-Sadr as the new bad man of Baghdad even as the US administration prepares for more atrocities against Iraqis. Bush can only aggressively pursue such a violent course in Iraq, in the face of the overwhelming opposition demonstrated in the recent Congressional elections, because of the support of the Democrats.

Bush’s nominee to replace Donald Rumsfeld as Defence Secretary, Robert Gates, has responded to questions from the Congressional Armed Services Committee by affirming his opposition to any early withdrawal of US troops from Iraq. Whatever the tactical differences, there is a consensus in US ruling circles that the occupation must be maintained to protect US economic and strategic interests in Iraq and the Middle East. The Democrats have already indicated their support for Gates’s nomination.

The leaking of the Hadley memo was deeply compromising to Maliki, who, despite denials by US officials, clearly snubbed Bush yesterday in an effort to maintain some appearance of independence. However, the very fact that he is in Amman and plans to meet Bush today testifies to his dependence, politically and militarily, on Washington. The Sadrist parliamentary faction warned last week it would walk out of the government if Maliki met the US president in Jordan.

Yesterday, the Sadrist faction carried out its threat, announcing that its ministers and 30 parliamentarians were “suspending” their participation in the government and the parliament. Like Maliki himself, the Sadrists are desperately balancing between their involvement in the US puppet government and the overwhelming opposition of their Shiite working class supporters who are demanding an end to the occupation, which has brought only death and misery.

The decision to “suspend participation,” rather than withdraw completely, has the character of a manoeuvre. As a Shiite official told the *New York Times*: “They’re just doing that to show their supporters that they are against deals or contact with the Americans... They will

cancel their suspension in a week or so. It’s a very stupid act.” But in Baghdad’s highly volatile political climate, with the threat of a US crackdown, the future course of the Sadrists, and indeed the shape of the government, are by no means clear.

For months, a series of signals have appeared in the US media indicating that if Maliki fails to carry out the Bush administration’s demands, he will be removed and replaced by a regime that is willing to give the green light for a military offensive against Sadr City and the Madhi Army. Former US Secretary of State James Baker, who co-chairs the top-level Iraqi Study Group in Washington, has already indicated that the Bush administration may have to dispense with the trappings of democracy to implement its plans in Iraq.

Another article in the *New York Times* yesterday observed that allowing Iraqis even a nominal say through elections had compounded the crisis for the US. “[I]f recent interviews in Baghdad with senior American and Iraqi officials are a guide, a bigger problem for the [Bush] administration in effecting change here may be that the United States, in toppling Saddam Hussein and sponsoring elections that brought the Shiites to power, began a process that left Washington with ever-diminishing influence.”

The obvious conclusion is to dispense with “democracy” and rearrange the government in Baghdad. “Shiites in Iraq are riven by factional rivalries, and there may be opportunities for the Americans to exploit those divisions to create parliamentary realignments. Indeed, some Iraqi leaders have started exploring new alliances to break the political logjam, possibly involving a parliamentary coup against Mr Maliki,” the article noted. While the *Times* did not mention it, others have already hinted at more sinister plotting for a military coup—which would necessarily require US backing.

This is the backdrop to the meeting today in Amman, which several commentators have characterised as Maliki’s “last chance”.



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