

Bush-Maliki summit: White House rejects any withdrawal from Iraq

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Thursday's summit meeting of President Bush and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki was a demonstration of both the crisis of the US occupation and the reactionary measures Washington is preparing in an attempt to maintain its grip on that war-ravaged country.

The location of the summit was itself of symbolic significance: the chief of state of the world's strongest military power could not visit the country he targeted for invasion and occupation, more than three years after his notorious boasting of "Mission Accomplished." Bush dared not risk even a few hours' stay inside the heavily protected Green Zone in downtown Baghdad. Instead, the White House staged the meeting in Amman, the capital of neighboring Jordan, a country whose monarchy rules over a majority-Palestinian population with the aid of US subsidies and weaponry.

A Bush visit to Baghdad would not only have been a security nightmare, it would have constituted a political provocation and could have brought down the Maliki government. Such is the outrage in the majority Shiite population over the US preparations for an offensive into largely Shiite Sadr City, the eastern suburbs of Baghdad, that a large section of the ruling Shiite coalition threatened to withdraw its support for Maliki if the prime minister went ahead with the summit.

Maliki canceled a meeting with Bush and King Abdullah II of Jordan, planned for Wednesday, at least in part to appease his Shiite critics at home. The prime minister was also clearly angered by the White House leak of a memo, summarizing the results of a visit to Baghdad last month by National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley, suggesting that the Iraqi leader was either incompetent or dishonest because of his opposition to a military assault on the Mahdi army, the Shiite militia that controls Sadr City.

The summit was finally held Thursday morning, and Bush and Maliki then met with journalists in a brief press conference. Bush gave a prepared statement that was remarkable for being completely at odds with the well-known realities on the ground in Iraq. He described Maliki as an elected leader chosen by the ballots of 12 million people, although he became prime minister only after the US occupiers demanded and secured the ouster of his predecessor, the equally "freely chosen" Ibrahim Jafaari. The Bush administration maneuvered to oust Jafaari for refusing to move militarily against the Shiite militias, the same complaint now leveled against his successor.

The US president described Maliki as the leader of a "sovereign

government," although it is a byproduct of the American occupation, a stooge regime whose writ does not extend beyond the Green Zone. Maliki has bitterly complained on many occasions that he does not control a single unit of either Iraqi or American military forces operating on the soil of his country.

Bush hailed the progress of the Joint Committee on Accelerating the Transferring of Security Responsibility, a previously obscure US-Iraqi liaison panel which is ostensibly organizing the shift in military command from puppeteer to puppet. Bush and Maliki celebrated their agreement that the Iraqi government will take formal responsibility for security matters by next June, although the transfer is purely nominal and American generals will, as Bush has repeatedly declared, have final authority over all military decision-making in Iraq.

Bush declared that "success in Iraq requires a united Iraq where democracy is preserved, the rule of law prevails, and minority rights are respected." By that standard, of course, the American intervention is a colossal failure. Iraq is neither united nor democratic, but a country whose entire social and political structure has been shattered by the American intervention, descending rapidly into barbaric forms of civil strife.

The most brazen violation of the "rule of law" was the US invasion itself, carried out in violation of international law and world public opinion. As for "minority rights," those Iraqis who now find themselves as minorities in their own neighborhoods—Shiites in Sunni-majority areas, Sunnis in areas controlled by Shiites—are being compelled to flee for their lives as a particularly vicious form of ethnic cleansing has become the norm. Last month's death toll, largely from sectarian violence, came to more than 3,700, and an estimated 655,000 have been killed since US tanks first crossed the border in March 2003.

Even the obedient American media has been compelled to balk at Bush administration efforts to depict Iraq as a democracy in the making, with the NBC television network and several of the major daily newspapers announcing this week that they would henceforth describe conditions in Iraq as those of civil war. Despite the muted character of this rebuff to the White House, it has definite political significance: the definition undermines Bush's claim that the war in Iraq is predominantly a struggle against international terrorism.

The sole substantive outcome of the Amman summit was another declaration by Bush that there would be no reversal of course in Iraq. In the course of his trip, first to the NATO summit in Riga, Latvia, and then to Jordan, he has referred to widespread

media speculation that the Iraq Study Group, a congressionally authorized bipartisan panel headed by former secretary of state James Baker, would recommend at least a partial withdrawal of American troops.

In Riga, Bush went out of his way to scotch the idea, saying “there’s one thing I’m not going to do: I’m not going to pull the troops off the battlefield before the mission is complete.” He reiterated this position on his arrival in Amman Wednesday, telling reporters, “This business about graceful exit just simply has no realism to it whatsoever.”

Bush took up the subject again at Thursday’s press conference, when reporters repeatedly questioned Maliki and himself about the timetable for a transfer of security responsibility, seeking to link it to some form of troop pullout. “I’ve been asked about timetables ever since we got into this,” Bush said, evincing irritation. “All the timetables mean is a timetable for withdrawal,” he added. “All that does is set people up for unrealistic expectations.”

Press reports Thursday, based on leaks from members of the Iraqi Study Group, indicate that the panel’s recommendations, due to be formally unveiled December 6, amount to an indefinite extension of the US occupation of Iraq. What the media commentaries characterize as “withdrawal” is nothing more than a redeployment of American forces, within and just outside Iraq, so that US troops play largely a reserve and training role, with units available for particular military offensives, while Iraqi forces are deployed on front-line patrols. Even if the Iraq Study Group proposals were to be adopted by the Bush administration—by no means a given—there could still be 70,000 or more US troops in Iraq a decade from now.

Neither in the media nor in the Democratic Party—about to assume control of Congress in the wake of the November 7 elections—is there any serious support for a withdrawal of American troops any time soon. Former President Bill Clinton reiterated his own opposition to a timetable for withdrawal in a statement Thursday.

According to a report in the *Los Angeles Times* November 29, the Pentagon is preparing its largest ever emergency spending bill to finance the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as “other military operations connected to the Bush administration’s war on terrorism.” Congressional leaders have been told that the spending request will be between \$127 billion and \$150 billion, with the exact figure to be determined when the bill is made public next February.

The *Times* noted only procedural objections from the Democrats, who want to limit the supplemental bill to the \$80 to \$100 billion range, not by cutting spending but by transferring the funding to the regular appropriations bill. The newspaper concluded, “there is little doubt a large supplemental will be approved, some Democratic aides said.”

It is remarkable how completely both parties have repudiated the verdict of the voters on November 7, who ousted the Republicans from control of both houses of Congress in a powerful show of opposition to the war in Iraq, reinforced by anger over deteriorating conditions of life at home. Exit polls on Election Day found that 55 percent of those voting favored an immediate withdrawal of all or at least some troops from Iraq. There was

more support for an immediate and complete pullout (29 percent) than for any other policy option.

But in the weeks since the vote, one proposal after another has surfaced for an increase in American troop strength in Iraq—most recently, in Pentagon plans to shift 3,000 to 18,000 troops into the country, mainly to strengthen patrols in Baghdad, in preparation for an assault on the Mahdi Army.

As the *Washington Post’s* online military affairs columnist William Arkin noted—in one of the few commentaries on this subject: “In the crazy ways of Washington, ever since the election swept in a Democratic majority fueled by public displeasure with the Iraq war, the momentum in the hallowed halls has been building for an increase in US military forces in Iraq.”

The Bush administration is in desperate crisis, weakened by its electoral repudiation, but more fundamentally by the failure of its intervention in Iraq. The purpose of this military adventure was not to foster “democracy” in the Middle East—the most recent and perhaps least credible of all the lies emanating from the White House. The purpose was to seize control of a country with the world’s second largest oil reserves and establish a strategic bastion in the Middle East. Combined with control of Afghanistan, and an increasing US military presence in Central Asia, American imperialism would then be in position to dominate the regions which supply the bulk of the world’s oil supplies.

The Democratic Party, whatever its criticisms of the military and political incompetence of the Bush administration in carrying out the conquest of Iraq, is as much a defender of American imperialism as the Republicans. Hence the agreement among all leading Democrats, regardless of their differences over tactics, that there can be no questioning of the legitimacy or legality of the war in Iraq, and no suggestion of the predatory motives which lie behind it. They all agree to treat the war as a blunder, not a crime.



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