

Bush administration conspires to replace Iraqi government

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Having rejected the findings of the Iraq Study Group, the Bush administration is publicly engaged in a series of high-level consultations in preparation for a policy shift. Evidence is emerging, however, that, behind the scenes, the White House is already implementing an alternative strategy, which includes the removal of the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. The political realignment would exclude the Shiite movement led by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and be accompanied by a build-up of US troops and a crackdown on the Sadrist Mahdi Army militia.

A series of press reports indicate that the mechanism being discussed for Maliki's removal is the break-up of the Shiite United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), which holds the largest number of parliamentary seats and dominates the current cabinet. The Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), whose leader Abdul Aziz al-Hakim held talks with President Bush last week, is apparently preparing to desert the UIA and form a "national unity" coalition with Kurdish nationalist parties, a major Sunni Arab party and, possibly, the party headed by former interim prime minister, Iyad Allawi. If a two-thirds majority in the parliament can be put together, a new government could be formed without elections.

The Bush administration has denied the reports. However, for anyone who has followed the media leaks of White House discussions over the disaster it has created in Iraq, little of the plan is unexpected. Throughout the year, Washington has been pressing the Shiite-dominated government to engage in "reconciliation" with, or more accurately to make concessions to, the Sunni Arab establishment that formed the ruling stratum of the Baath Party of former dictator Saddam Hussein.

The calculation is that such a settlement would lead to a significant decrease in the entrenched Baathist and Sunni-based insurgency against the US occupation and at least curtail the civil war between rival Sunni and Shiite militias. The true motives of the US invasion—the opening up of Iraq's lucrative oil reserves to US corporations and the establishment of long-term military bases—are not realisable without some degree of political stability. In order to reach a deal, the Bush administration has insisted that the Shiite and Kurdish parties, who have collaborated with the occupation, cede greater political power and economic privilege to the Sunni elite that the invasion supplanted.

The main obstacle has been the opposition of the Sadrist movement, which is emerging as the most powerful Shiite faction

and upon which Maliki has depended for political support. The Sadrists have a mass following among the Shiite working class and urban poor in Baghdad. To consolidate their own authority and appease strong anti-Baathist sentiment among their supporters, the Sadrists have resisted demands for "reconciliation". Al Sadr continues to demand a timetable for an end to the US occupation and for the Iraqi central government to control the country's oil resources. The Mahdi Army, which rose up against US troops twice in 2004, has grown into a formidable armed force of as many as 60,000, raising considerable concerns in the US military and calls for a preemptive strike to destroy it.

On November 8, a memo by Bush's national security advisor Stephen Hadley was leaked in full to the *New York Times*. It called for the administration to devote its energies to forcing Maliki to break his alliance with Sadr and "form a new political base among moderate politicians from Sunni, Shia, Kurdish and other communities". Hadley's specific proposals included talks with SCIRI's Hakim.

Maliki has repeatedly balked at US demands to fully break with the Sadrists, who Hadley accused of using the government to pursue a "campaign to consolidate Shia power in Baghdad". An open rift has now developed between Maliki and Sadr however. Maliki's agreement to meet with Bush in Jordan, following the leak of the Hadley memo, prompted a walkout of the government by 30 Sadr supporters and five cabinet ministers. They have not yet ended their boycott.

Reports that the Iraqi government has been holding secret talks with Sunni insurgents and former Baathists have added to the divisions. On Sunday, Sadr characterised Maliki's policy as being "yesterday's friends are today's enemies, and yesterday enemies are today's friends". Large-scale clashes and ethnic cleansing were reported in Baghdad over the weekend as Mahdi Army militants sought to drive Sunnis out of a northwestern suburb and consolidate control over strategic entry points into their strongholds.

There is no reason to doubt that the Bush administration is trying to exploit the rift to end any Sadrist involvement in the government and provoke a confrontation with the Madhi army. Maliki and his own Shiite faction, the Da'awa Party, have reportedly been invited to join the new coalition. Hakim and SCIRI, however, rivals of the Sadrists for influence, are stepping forward to function as the main Shiite component of a "national unity" regime and provide a new prime minister.

A representative of the Kurdish factions, deputy prime minister Barham Salih, declared: “A number of key political parties across the sectarian-ethnic divide recognise the gravity of the situation and have become increasingly aware that their fate, and that of the country, cannot be held hostage to the whims of the extreme fringe within their communities.”

Following Hakim’s visit, the leader of the large Sunni-based Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP), Iraqi Vice-President Tariq al-Hashemi, also flew for Washington on Sunday for his own talks with Bush. The original date announced for talks between Bush and Hashemi had been January. Explaining the revised schedule, a representative for Hashemi told Associated Press: “The failure of the government has forced us into this in the hope that it can provide a solution. The new alliance will form the new government.”

The man being touted to replace Maliki is SCIRI’s Adel Abdul Medhi, who Washington has previously backed for the post. While in Washington, Hakim reassured the White House that SCIRI’s historical ties with the Iranian Shiite regime would not be an obstacle to its collaboration with the US. He told the Institute of Peace: “We confirmed on more than one occasion that we are seeking to build an independent Iraq away from any affiliation to any power, regional or international.” Under conditions where SCIRI is calling for the ongoing presence of US troops, this was effectively a pledge that Iraq would be an American, not an Iranian, client state.

Underpinning the coalescence of SCIRI, the Kurdish factions and the Sunni IIP is their mutual fear that the recriminations within the American ruling elite over Iraq’s descent into civil war and chaos could see all their interests marginalised.

SCIRI and the Kurdish nationalists have bitterly denounced the findings of the Iraq Study Group headed by former Secretary of State James Baker for opposing regional autonomy in Iraq. The federalist Iraqi constitution, which was largely drafted by the US embassy before a referendum in October 2005, granted considerable powers to regional governments, including over any new exploitation of oil reserves. A regional authority already exists in the Kurdish north and SCIRI wants to establish another in the Shiite south.

The Hadley memo hinted that efforts should be made to convince a layer of the Sunni establishment to accept the formation of a Sunni Arab region in western and central Iraq. Hadley called for the diplomatic initiatives aimed at “talking up provincial council elections next spring/summer as a mechanism for Sunni empowerment”. Combined with other proposals for greater Sunni representation within the federal government, concessions on de-Baathification and guarantees of a share of oil revenues, Hashemi’s IIP may be prepared to drop their current opposition to regionalism. Hakim pointedly warned recently that the “biggest losers” in any full scale civil war would be the Sunnis.

According to the *New York Times* last week, a deal to ensure a Sunni region gained a proportional share of oil revenues from Iraq’s oil fields—which are overwhelmingly in the Kurdish north and Shiite south—is in the final stages of negotiation. Under intense pressure from US ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, the Kurdish

parties reportedly agreed in principle to the distribution of oil revenues on the basis of population.

On Monday, Bush held high-level meetings with Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, ambassador Khalilzad, the Pentagon military hierarchy and foreign policy advisors. Outgoing Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld spent Monday in Iraq and also spoke with senior commanders. According to media reports, the opposition of the Sadrist movement to any regime change in Baghdad was a key matter for discussion.

The *New York Times* reported on Monday: “If Mr Sadr thinks he is being ousted or marginalised from the government, he could ignite another rebellion, this time with a militia that has grown exponentially in size since 2004 when the American troops struggled to put down the two earlier uprisings. Senior American commanders, though, say that the attempts to make peace with Mr Sadr through politics have failed and a military assault on Sadr strongholds in Baghdad and across the south may be inevitable.”

The *Los Angeles Times* reported on Wednesday: “As President Bush weighs new policy options for Iraq, strong support has coalesced in the Pentagon behind a military plan to ‘double down’ in the country with a substantial buildup in American troops, an increase in industrial aid and a major combat offensive against Moqtada al-Sadr...”

Military officials told the *Los Angeles Times* the plan was a “gamble” and “would probably require major changes” in the Iraqi government. “US embassy officials”, the officials said, “would have to help usher in a new coalition in Baghdad that was willing to confront the militias”. Defence strategist Bob Killebrow put a timetable of four to six months for the US military to “take on” the Sadrists. Killebrow declared: “Our conventional forces, not advisors, have to team with the Iraqi army and neutralise the Mahdi Army and other militias. If we don’t do that, everything else we are talking about is hot air.”

The closed-doors conspiracies taking place between the Bush administration and various Iraqi factions have vast implications. In Iraq, it means thousands more deaths as the US military seeks to destroy the Mahdi Army and escalates operations against remaining Sunni insurgents. For the American people, it means the war they repudiated in last month’s congressional election is going to be intensified, not brought to an end.



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