

Washington pushes ahead with plans for Iraq “regime change”

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Further evidence this week confirms that the Bush administration’s “change of course” in Iraq includes the installation of a new regime that will sanction a military crackdown on the Mahdi Army—the militia associated with supporters of the Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and his Shiite fundamentalist Da’awa Party are being presented with an ultimatum: abandon the Sadrists or go down with them.

The Sadrists are currently the largest faction in the Shiite United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), which includes Da’awa, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and several smaller Shiite formations. The US is reportedly urging SCIRI to lead a walkout from the UIA to form a new coalition with Kurdish parties, the Sunni Arab-based Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) and the alliance headed by former CIA asset Iyad Allawi. Da’awa has also been invited to join. The combination would potentially have the necessary two-thirds majority within the 275-member parliament to form a new government—without the Sadrists, and with or without Maliki.

Washington then expects the green light for an assault on the Mahdi Army. The Bush administration considers the Sadrists to be one of the principal obstacles to US domination over Iraq. Sadr has mass support among the Shiite Iraqi working class and urban poor, especially in Baghdad. While collaborating with the US occupation, his movement verbally opposes the presence of American forces and US plans for the free-market reorganisation of the oil industry. Earlier this month, Sadr ordered his supporters to suspend their participation in the Maliki government until the US agreed to a timetable for withdrawal. Yesterday, the Sadrist office in Baghdad demanded the closure of the US and British embassies and the expulsion of their ambassadors and staff.

Moreover, Sadr has also opposed US aggression elsewhere in the Middle East. Under conditions where the

Bush administration maintains its bellicose stance toward Iran, Syria and the Lebanese Shiite movement Hezbollah, the Pentagon views the Mahdi Army as a dangerous fifth column inside Iraq. It now has as many as 60,000 fighters and thousands more within the US-trained Iraqi army and police who could launch attacks on American forces in the event of open hostilities. To create the necessary pretext for an attack, the White House and the US media are systematically demonising the Sadrists. Without evidence, the Mahdi Army is being accused of being the main Shiite militia carrying out sectarian attacks against Sunnis, and of receiving funding and training from Iran and Hezbollah.

Plotting against the Sadrists is well advanced. Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, SCIRI’s leader, visited Washington in early December for personal talks with Bush. On Tuesday, it was the turn of the IIP’s leader, Tariq al-Hashemi. On Wednesday, Bush placed a phone call to Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, the leader of one of the main Kurdish parties. On Thursday, senators John McCain and Joseph Lieberman—virulent opponents of any US withdrawal—led a Congressional delegation to Baghdad for talks with Maliki, Talabani and senior American commanders.

At a press briefing on Tuesday, White House spokesman Tony Snow confirmed that the rush of diplomacy is part of a conspiracy against the Sadrists.

Question: “Is it true that there is a coalition that the US is encouraging to try to get the influence of Moqtada al Sadr out of the government?”

Snow: “What I will tell you is that the Maliki government—and we support it—has talked about the importance of taking on sectarian violence, whether it be in militias or whether it be insurgent groups. It has been the long-stated policy of that government that armed forces that are not part of the Iraqi government were simply inappropriate, and that it was important to have

them make a choice: They can integrate peacefully into society, or they're going to have to be taken on in some way, shape or form."

At a press briefing on Wednesday, Snow denied any US involvement but admitted that a political realignment is well underway. "The administration really is not involved other than consulting and encouraging those who are already involved in a process or trying to build a moderate consensus among Shia, Sunni, and Kurds. But the business of coalition-building, of course, is being done by the [Iraqi] government itself. We're consulting people who have been working with the Maliki government. This government is not in the business of putting together such an assemblage. That's been done already," he said.

On Thursday, Sunni leader Tariq al-Hashemi publicly aligned himself with the Bush administration. He opposed any withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, declaring it would allow "the [Shiite] militia infiltrated government forces" to "escalate their massacres of innocent people". The US occupation, he declared, had formed a "new army and police from racist militias, some mercenaries and organised crime gangs" and had a "duty to reform the Iraqi government forces". He said the IIP had "no objections" to the plans for a new SCIRI-led government. "We will go for that", he told the Washington Institute of Peace.

The same day in Baghdad, Senator McCain told Maliki that he had to order the political and physical destruction of the Sadrist movement. Speaking to journalists, McCain declared: "We should have arrested Moqtada al-Sadr three years ago. He continues to be a major obstacle to peace. His influence in domestic politics needs to be eliminated." McCain and Lieberman are both calling for a surge of US troop numbers in Baghdad. McCain told the press he had discussed with American generals the deployment of up to 10 additional combat brigades to Iraq—some 35,000 frontline troops—"to bring the situation under control".

Whatever finally emerges from these diplomatic manoeuvres, it will have nothing to do with the Bush administration's claims to be laying the foundations for "democracy" in Iraq. Whatever the White House's formal denials, it is obvious that the composition and policies of the next puppet regime are being decided in Washington, not in Baghdad.

The Iraqi bourgeois factions being gathered to form a new government have the most venal calculations—power, privilege and the prospect of wealth for a small elite if the Bush administration can stabilise Iraq and throw open its

oil industry to US and other foreign corporations. SCIRI, the Kurdish parties and the IIP appear to be coming together around only one policy—that Iraq should be divided into a Shiite region in the south, a Sunni region in the centre and the Kurdish region in the north. The government revenues derived from the transnational exploitation of Iraq's energy resources would be divided among them, for the benefit of the ruling stratum.

For the mass of the Iraqi people, the US agenda will create only greater death and injury, entrenched sectarian tensions, permanent poverty and ongoing foreign military occupation. Iraq would also become the staging ground for further US wars of aggression.

The Bush administration has announced that its "new strategy" for Iraq will not be publicly revealed until early next year. There are tremendous divisions within the US ruling class over how to proceed; including questions as to whether the US military is capable of confronting the Mahdi Army. An attack on the Sadrists would create an open Shiite insurgency against the occupation, on top of the largely Sunni Arab guerilla war that is killing and wounding over 600 US troops every month. American commanders have repeatedly responded to the talk of sending extra forces to Baghdad with warnings that the military is already stretched thin, close to breaking point and might only be able to send 10,000 to 15,000 additional troops.

Just weeks after the majority of the American people made clear their opposition to the Iraq war in Congressional elections, the Democrats and Republicans have come together to oppose any US military withdrawal. The US political establishment is deeply concerned that any retreat from Iraq would have catastrophic consequences for the strategic position of the US in the Middle East and internationally. What is now being prepared is a reckless new adventure, which, far from "stabilising" Iraq, is going to take the US military deeper into the quagmire.



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