

Opposition in Baghdad among Kurdish, Shiite parties to Iraq Study Group

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The findings of the US Iraq Study Group headed by Republican powerbroker James Baker have been rejected out of hand by the Kurdish nationalist parties and the Shiite fundamentalist Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). The most strident criticisms came from Iraqi President and prominent Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani, who denounced the ISG report as “unjust and unfair”, “dangerous”, “an insult to the Iraqi people” and “dead in the water”.

The Kurdish groups were among the most ardent supporters of the US invasion, viewing it as the means of transforming Iraq’s predominantly Kurdish northern provinces into a de-facto independent state. Under the new Iraqi constitution imposed under US occupation, the north was placed under the jurisdiction of a Kurdish Regional Government (KRG).

The constitution granted the KRG complete authority over all new oil production in the region. As well, it stipulated that a referendum take place by December 2007 to determine whether the inhabitants of the oil-rich city of Kirkuk wished to join the KRG.

The incorporation of Kirkuk would give the KRG authority over as much as 40 percent of Iraq’s oil reserves. In the lead-up to the referendum, there have been a series of accusations that Kurdish militiamen are using threats and violence to pressure ethnic Arabs and Turkomen to leave Kirkuk in order to create an overwhelmingly majority Kurdish population.

Like the Kurds, the Shiite establishment largely supported the US invasion as a means to supplant the traditional Sunni Arab establishment that had held power in Iraq since the country’s formation in 1920. Saddam Hussein’s Baath Party rested on the Sunni propertied and tribal elite. Shiite parties have dominated each of the puppet governments formed under US occupation. Most units in the new army, interior ministry and police are made up of Shiites, giving their participation in US operations against Sunni Arab insurgents the character of a sectarian conflict.

SCIRI, one of the most powerful Shiite factions, has

aggressively supported the federalist constitution and declared its intention to form a Shiite regional government encompassing nine southern provinces of Iraq. Under the US-backed constitution, the bulk of oil revenues would flow into the pockets of such a regional identity, as 60 percent of the country’s reserves are located within its proposed borders.

The ISG report cuts directly across the ambitions of the Kurdish and Shiite parties. In the face of a society collapsing into a Shiite-Sunni civil war, an entrenched Sunni insurgency against American troops, rising tensions throughout the Middle East and tremendous domestic opposition in the US, the ISG advocated a new political strategy. It called for overtures to the former Sunni ruling elite and regional talks aimed at re-establishing a strong central Iraqi government to assist US forces to impose “stability”.

Baker specifically recommended the rewriting of the constitution to oppose regional control over oil revenues and recommended that the Kirkuk referendum be indefinitely delayed. Moreover, the ISG called for the future of Kirkuk to be discussed by an “International Iraq Support Group,” including Turkey, Syria and Iran—all states that repress their own substantial Kurdish minorities and bitterly oppose the emergence of a de-facto Kurdish state on their borders. The ISG also recommended a substantial reversal of the de-Baathification policy used by the US occupation and its Shiite and Kurdish backers to marginalise the Sunni elite.

Kurdish reaction to the ISG report was particularly vitriolic. Masoud Barzani, a longtime Kurdish leader and KRG President, issued a statement on December 7, the day after the release of the Baker report. Opposing central control of oil revenues, Barzani stated: “We reiterate our commitment to the Iraqi constitution... and reject attempts to alter this solution”. Denouncing the proposal to postpone the Kirkuk referendum, the statement declared it would “in no way be accepted by the people of the Kurdish region”. Outside involvement in discussions on the city’s fate was condemned as “counter to the interests of the Iraqi people and especially the interests of the people of the Kurdish

region”.

Clearly threatening Kurdish unrest, Barzani declared that the ISG offered “unrealistic and unreasonable recommendations in the hope of helping the US extricate itself from a difficult position... we, then, on behalf of the people of the Kurdistan region, reject everything that is against the interests of Iraq and the Kurdistan region”.

Going further than Barzani, Iraqi President Talabani rejected one of the key ISG proposals—embedding US troops within every unit of the Iraqi military. Up to three of the 10 divisions of the new Iraqi Army are based in the north and most of their officers and soldiers are Kurds. The Kurdish nationalists do not want them under the influence of American personnel whose orders may well run counter to the KRG’s aims.

Talabani pointedly recalled the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, when the first Bush administration called for Kurds and Shiites to rise up, then ordered the US military to do nothing as Saddam Hussein’s military crushed the uprisings. George Bush I and Baker decided that the survival of Hussein’s regime was more advantageous to US interests in the Middle East than any new regime that emerged out of a successful rebellion. Among both Shiites and Kurds, this is still remembered as a monstrous betrayal. Referring to the IRG report, Talabani declared that “we can smell the attitude of James Baker in 1991 when he liberated Kuwait but left Saddam in power”.

A December 2 op-ed in the *Washington Post* by Najmaldin Karim, the president of the Washington Kurdish Institute, described the ISG report as “unlikely to offer anything other than the same discredited policies that for 60 years created a dangerous illusion of stability in the Middle East, a ‘stability’ bought with the blood of Middle Easterners and that produced such horrors as the massive 1991 bloodletting...” In preparing their report, ISG members did not visit the Kurdish region. Karim denounced this as stemming from the “ideological prejudice” of the “diehard Arabists” that Baker relied upon for advice.

Iraq’s Shiite establishment centred their condemnation of the ISG report on its calls for a regional conference to discuss Iraq, insisting instead that Iraqis should decide their future. Regional states such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria and Turkey all have oppressed Shiite or Kurdish minorities and would be most likely to support Baker’s opposition to federalism and turn to the Sunni elite.

SCIRI leader Abdel Aziz al-Hakim declared that the ISG report “contains inaccurate information that is based on dishonest sources”. In a speech delivered days before the findings were released and just after meeting with President Bush, he told the Washington Peace Institute: “Federalism definitely will not divide Iraq, but it might cause some fear

in some countries in the region where they were used to the singular rule, which deprives the other minorities from exercising their religious and national freedom and legitimate rights.”

Hakim denounced the opposition to federalism within Iraq—Sunni and Shiite—as the position of those who “believe that whoever is in control of the government in Baghdad can rule according to what he desires”. Hakim made clear that he was including the rival Shiite movement led by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, who calls for a timetable for the withdrawal of US forces and backs a centralised state. Stressing SCIRI’s stance, he declared “there is no way to achieve a fair political and administrative system except by federalism”.

The fervour of the Kurdish parties’ and SCIRI’s opposition to the ISG report reflects the fact that the Bush administration has already rejected its key recommendations. The White House intends to base itself on the only political forces that have consistently collaborated with the US agenda of opening up of Iraq’s lucrative oil reserves to US corporations and establishing a long-term military footprint in the Middle East.

It is no accident that within days of the ISG findings being published, the international press contains reports that the White House is urging SCIRI and the Kurdish parties to form a new government with the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP), which was the only Sunni formation to accept the federalist constitution. Iraqi vice-president and IIP leader Tariq al-Hashemi brought forward a planned visit to Washington to this week and held personal talks with Bush on Monday.

Intense discussions have also been taking place over an oil revenue-sharing agreement that would deliver a greater share to a Sunni region in central and western Iraq in line with the IIP’s demands. In return, the so-called “national unity” regime would work with the US military to attempt to destroy the most recalcitrant opponents of the US occupation—the Sunni insurgents and the Shiite Sadrist movement.



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