

Bush administration threatens Iraqi prime minister as Baghdad bloodbath is prepared

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The Bush administration has again threatened to depose Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki if he does not fully collaborate with its surge of troops into Iraq and its plans for a brutal crackdown against the Shiite fundamentalist movement led by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr.

Since Bush's speech detailing the escalation of the Iraq war last Wednesday, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has stated on several occasions that Maliki is "living on borrowed time". The newly appointed Defense Secretary Robert Gates issued the bluntest threat. Speaking before the Senate Armed Services Committee on Friday, Gates was directly asked what would happen if the Iraqi prime minister balked at the US agenda. Gates replied: "I think the first consequence that he has to face is the possibility that he will lose his job."

That the destruction of the Sadrists is a primary objective of the deployment of 17,000 additional American troops to Baghdad is an open secret in the US and Iraq. As it pursues its reckless course of establishing American domination over the oil resources of the Middle East, the Bush administration is not prepared to co-exist with a movement that has mass support among the Shiite Iraqi working class and has pledged that its Mahdi Army militia will take up arms in defense of Iran in the event of a US attack. The US military views the Mahdi Army as a dangerous Iranian fifth column and has agitated for its destruction since an uneasy truce was struck to end an anti-occupation Sadrist uprising in 2004.

A joint US-Iraqi government force is in the process of assembling for an offensive into Sadr City, the densely populated Shiite suburb of Baghdad where Sadr derives his main support. A brigade of the US 82nd airborne division is moving from Kuwait to the Iraqi capital to

join two American armoured brigades, as are three predominantly Kurdish brigades of the Iraqi army. The American military command insisted on the Kurdish units as most of the Iraqi government troops currently in Baghdad are Shiites. Many support or sympathise with Sadr and may refuse to fight.

By mid-February, some 40,000 American and Iraqi troops, backed by massive air power, will be in position for savage urban warfare in the streets of Baghdad. The Sadrists are making their own preparations. According to several reports, every family among the two million people who live in Sadr City has been asked to provide one male aged between 15 and 45 for service in the Mahdi Army—giving the militia a potential strength of over 100,000. Abdul Razzaq al-Nidawi, a prominent Sadrist spokesman, stated last week: "We call on the American people to oppose sending more of their sons to Iraq so that they will not be flown back in coffins."

While US casualties would undoubtedly spike during any offensive, the greatest loss of life would be suffered by the Iraqi people. Shiite militiamen equipped only with small arms face being slaughtered by American aircraft, helicopters and tanks.

Nothing could demonstrate the puppet character of the Iraqi government more sharply than its sanction for the impending assault. The Sadrists are arguably the most popular political movement among Iraqi Shiites, who make up 60 percent of the population. They have appealed to overwhelming anti-occupation sentiment by calling for a timetable for US withdrawal and demanding the government address the country's appalling social conditions. At the same time, they joined the puppet government and are the largest faction in the ruling United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) coalition of Shiite parties. Maliki himself has been a close ally of Sadr and secured the UIA's candidacy for

prime minister on the votes of the Sadrists legislators.

Concerned at the potential loss of a major base of support, Maliki resisted the US plan for several months. Last November, he told Bush that he wanted all American troops to withdraw from Baghdad. Gates admitted to the Senates armed services committee that Maliki “wanted to do this operation on his own”—in other words, leave the capital in the hands of Shiite-dominated Iraqi army units who would concentrate on fighting Sunni Arab guerillas and not carry out an offensive against the Sadrists.

Maliki, however, has signalled that he has bowed down to Washington’s demands. The Shiite elite that he represents is not prepared to risk the power and privilege they have gained under the US occupation. Last weekend, following Gates’s statement and after days of silence on Bush’s speech, his office finally issued a press statement declaring that the US troop surge “represents the common vision and mutual understanding between the Iraqi government and the US administration”.

Bush officials have emphasised over the past several days that Maliki has endorsed an assault on the Sadrists. White House press secretary Tony Snow told journalists on Friday: “I think through his words and deeds that he’s addressing key American concerns such as saying to the Shiite militias, you’re not exempt. And he’s doing it by name. He’s talked about the Sadrists, he’s talked about Moqtada al-Sadr.”

On Sunday, Vice President Dick Cheney was asked on Fox News: “If US forces want to go into Sadr City and take on Moqtada al-Sadr, do you promise, can you pledge, to the American people we’ll do that regardless of what Maliki says?” Cheney replied that the administration and Maliki “had an understanding that will allow us to go forward and get the job done”.

If Maliki does hesitate, alternatives are waiting in the wings to replace him. Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, who held personal talks with Bush in December and heads the Shiite Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), has voiced his full support for “the Baghdad security plan”, saying that the “government should strike with an iron fist against those who endanger the safety of the people”. The US ambassador in Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, is reportedly still working to assemble a new coalition made up of SCIRI, the Kurdish parties and Sunni-based organisations to

replace the current government if need be. According to the British *Guardian*, the leading Shiite cleric, Ali al-Sistani, agreed last week not to oppose military operations to disarm the Mahdi Army.

In the United States, the most vociferous supporters of the Iraq war are calling for a massacre in Sadr City and the assassination of Moqtada al-Sadr. Mike Reagan, son of former president Ronald Reagan, wrote in *Frontpage Magazine*: “If we are not going to allow our armed forces to go in and do what they do best—break things and kill people—then we might as well give up and go home.... Moqtada al-Sadr must go, preferably following in the footsteps of Saddam Hussein. And soon. Very soon.”

Ralph Peters, an extreme right-wing commentator who wrote an article last year entitled “Kill Moqtada now”, declared in the *New York Post* last week that the “big test” of Bush’s surge would be whether it involved “the occupation, disarmament and ideological disinfection of Sadr City”. He demanded: “Rules of engagement must be loosened. We have to stop playing Barney Fife and *fight*. And the president has to stand behind the troops when the game gets rough.” (emphasis in original)

Just two months after the American people repudiated the Iraq war in congressional elections and made clear they wanted its end, the Bush administration is preparing even greater crimes.



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