

US talks of “reconciliation” with Sunni insurgents in Iraq

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After more than four years of fighting in Iraq and repeated declarations that victory was at hand, the Bush administration and the US military say they are prepared to grant an amnesty to anti-occupation guerilla fighters who agree to stop attacking American and Iraqi government forces.

US Lieutenant General Ray Odierno spoke about “reconciliation” at a press conference on May 31. “We believe a large majority of the groups within Iraq are reconcilable and are now interested in engaging with us, but more importantly, they want to engage and become a part of the government of Iraq,” he stated.

Odierno explicitly included most Sunni Arab guerilla movements and the Jaish al-Mahdi, or Mahdi Army militia of Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, in his “reconcilable” category. “I believe there are elements that are irreconcilable, but I believe the majority are. The figures I use, I believe about 80 percent are reconcilable—both Jaish al-Mahdi and Sunni insurgents,” he said.

In a remarkable comment, considering the Bush administration’s rhetoric since September 11, 2001, Odierno even held out the prospect of a settlement with some Sunni Islamic extremists aligned to Al Qaeda. “Very few of Al Qaeda are reconcilable,” he said, “but there might be a small portion”.

Answering a question about the negotiations, Odierno replied: “I won’t go into specifics, but yes, we are. We have refocused our commanders at all levels. I’m empowering them and trying to give them some tools to reach out, because there are insurgents reaching out to us... And we’re talking about ceasefires and maybe signing some things that say they won’t conduct operations against the government of Iraq or against coalition forces. It’s happening at small levels.”

The Mahdi Army has officially observed a ceasefire with the US military since September 2004, when Sadr ended a short-lived armed uprising in exchange for an amnesty. Since then, the Sadrist movement, while continuing to denounce the occupation, has participated in elections and holds seats in the Iraqi parliament. The Shiite fighters are under orders not to resist the current US operations and in most cases are obeying their leadership. Despite the ceasefire, however, the US military is detaining or killing hundreds of Mahdi Army fighters and preparing for a major incursion into the militia’s stronghold of Sadr City in Baghdad.

The reconciliation discussed by Odierno is not, therefore, primarily with the Mahdi Army. Instead, he highlighted the deal struck late last year with a coalition of Sunni Arab tribal sheiks in

the volatile western of Anbar. The sheiks, many of whom previously participated in the insurgency, offered last year to fight alongside the US military against the Al Qaeda-aligned Islamic State in Iraq (ISI).

The ISI—Islamic extremists who have gained support among sections of the Sunni population since the 2003 invasion—have been undermining tribal influence. In exchange for the sheiks’ collaboration, the US military is assisting the sheiks to slaughter their rivals and re-establish control over large parts of Anbar. Thousands of their followers have been permitted to flood into the local Iraqi army and police units, and the US has armed a tribal paramilitary force. The sheiks’ political party, the Anbar Salvation Council, is positioning itself to take over the provincial government in elections due later in the year. In effect, the province is being turned into a tribal fiefdom. As a result of this sordid arrangement, the number of attacks on US forces has fallen by more 50 percent in Anbar.

Odierno’s praise for the developments in Anbar was echoed on Sunday by the US ambassador to Iraq, Ryan Crocker. Crocker told Fox News: “What we’ve seen out in Anbar province to the west clearly demonstrates that tribes and others that at one point sided with, or at least were sympathetic to, Al Qaeda, very definitely have changed their position and are now supporting Iraqi and coalition efforts against Al Qaeda...”

Asked whether the Bush administration would support an amnesty for groups that had attacked American forces, Crocker pointedly replied: “As part of a political reconciliation process, amnesty can be very important. It can also be very important in this particular context as we seek to draw as many elements away from the fight against us and into the fight against a common enemy, Al Qaeda. In terms of individual cases involving people who have American blood on their hands, that is something we have to consider very carefully.”

The US military has sought to emulate the Anbar arrangement in other centres of the Sunni insurgency, with some limited success. Tribal leaders in the eastern province of Diyala have reportedly formed their own “Salvation Council” and joined American operations against the ISI, which had effectively taken over the capital of Baquba. Bloody fighting is currently taking place in and around Baquba, however, and US casualties in the area have soared.

In Baghdad, where US casualties have also risen sharply, a two-day battle in the Sunni suburb of Amiriya between Al Qaeda-

aligned and other anti-occupation insurgents may be related to the “reconciliation” plans. A spokesman for the Anbar sheiks claimed to have sent 50 fighters to assist cells of the Islamic Army—one of the main Sunni guerilla groups—to avenge the killing of their local leader by ISI extremists. Both sides suffered casualties.

In the aftermath of the clashes, American and Iraqi government troops were able to move into Amiriya with minimal resistance. A militia leader told *IraqSlogger* correspondent Jane Arraf that he was prepared to “work with the American forces... to have security here”. Captain Kevin Sagle of the 23rd Infantry Regiment told Arraf that they were telling local fighters to “come out with the Iraqi army, tell us what’s going on and let us be the muscle behind it to go out there and get them [Al Qaeda]”.

The *IraqSlogger* website, which is becoming a significant English-language source for Iraqi politics and media commentary, reported Tuesday that the Iraqi government had also recently engaged in talks with a faction of Saddam Hussein’s Baathist Party that has been fighting the occupation since 2003. According to a summary published on June 5, Baath leaders Younis al-Ahmad and Muzhir Awwad met government officials in Jordan. If they agreed to “publish a statement condemning the actions of the former regime... deploring the terrorist acts... and change the name of the Baath Party,” the account stated, they would be offered “the right to return to Iraq and resume political activism”. Ahmad and Awwad were reportedly opposed to the sectarian atrocities on Shiite civilians carried out by Al Qaeda, which have led to bloody revenge attacks against Sunnis by Shiite militias.

A deal with the predominantly Sunni leadership of the Baath Party is one of the political objectives of the Bush administration’s “surge” in Iraq. The systematic repression of hundreds of thousands of Baath Party members following the US invasion enraged an already embittered Sunni population and created mass support for a guerilla war. After failing to defeat the resistance militarily, the hope in Washington is that giving a more prominent role to the Sunni establishment will lead to a significant reduction in the insurgency and stabilise much of the country.

The Sunni ruling elites in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan—which oppose the domination of the new Iraqi government by Shiite parties with ties to their regional rival Iran—are also calling for the reversal of de-Baathification and the return of Sunni political power.

One of the Bush administration’s “benchmarks” for Maliki’s Shiite-dominated government is the repeal of the “de-Baathification” laws. The laws were introduced in the first days of the occupation to prevent ex-Baathist leaders from holding positions in either the government, military or state apparatus. Abolishing them would open the way for many Sunni leaders who are currently marginalised to seek a place within the US puppet state in Iraq.

The push for “reconciliation” with Sunni insurgents and the Baathist hierarchy, however, threatens to provoke a volatile reaction among the majority Shiite population of the country. Millions of Shiite working class and urban poor suffered bloody oppression under Hussein’s regime and oppose any return of Baathist figures. They are equally hostile to the US occupation, which has brought catastrophic living conditions and the constant

threat of sectarian violence by Sunni extremists.

Reflecting this sentiment, de-Baathification is bitterly opposed by the Sadrist movement, which is consolidating itself as the dominant party among Shiites. The Sadrists represent a layer of the Shiite clerical and political elite that aspires to take over the power and privileges previously monopolised by the Baathist establishment. Their popular support hinges, however, on projecting an anti-occupation image and promising improved living standards. In April, close to one million people joined a demonstration called by Sadr in Najaf to demand a timetable for the withdrawal of all US and other troops.

Yet, in many respects, the Sadrists have served a crucial political role for the US occupation. While opposing the presence of foreign troops, Sadrists have until recently been part of Maliki’s cabinet and belong to Maliki’s ruling Shiite coalition. The military and political aspects of the current US surge are making Sadr’s balancing act increasingly difficult. The Mahdi Army is being attacked, while Washington is seeking to rehabilitate Baathists, and has recently indicated that the US military could remain in Iraq for decades. The Bush administration is also menacing Iran, with whom many Shiites sympathise.

General Odierno stated last week that the US has sought talks with Sadr, to encourage the Sadrists to shift their attitude to the US “benchmark” demands. Sadr’s response, in a rare interview with the British *Independent* on June 3, indicates that the limits of his collaboration are being tested. The perception that the US pursuit of “reconciliation” with the Sunni insurgency is an attempt to dislodge Shiite parties from their newly-won power could become the trigger for a new rebellion.

Explaining his refusal to talk to American officials, Sadr declared: “There is nothing to talk about. The Americans are occupiers and thieves and they must set a timetable to leave this country. We must know that they are leaving, and we must know when. The occupiers have tried to provoke us, but I ordered unarmed resistance for the sake of my people. We have been patient, exercising statesmanship, but if the occupation and oppression continues, we will fight.”



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