

Bush administration embarks on reckless new tactic in Iraq

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With its much-vaunted “surge” showing no signs of success and American casualties continuing to rise, the US military has begun to arm and equip sections of the Sunni insurgency, supposedly to fight against intransigent layers such as Al Qaeda-linked groups. Weapons, ammunition, cash, fuel and supplies are being provided to selected Sunni militia. This latest twist in the Pentagon’s strategy in Iraq can only be construed as another sign of the Bush administration’s desperation and crisis.

A prominent article in the *New York Times* on Monday revealed the extent of the new collaboration, which was first tested out in the western province of Anbar and is now being tried in four other Sunni insurgent strongholds—parts of Baghdad such as Amiraya district and the central and north-central provinces of Babil, Diyala and Salahuddin. The “Anbar model,” which is being hailed for sharply reducing attacks on American troops in the insurgent hotbed of Ramadi, involved a US deal with local tribal sheikhs to arm their supporters, incorporate them in the Iraqi security forces and back them to root out and destroy extreme Islamists.

There is, of course, no guarantee that the money and arms handed to outfits will be used for the agreed purposes and not turned American and Iraqi government troops. According to the *New York Times*, the official requirement that US support be provided only to insurgent groups that have not attacked American troops is loosely enforced. Efforts to keep track of weapons and fighters by recording serial numbers and biometric information can merely have a cosmetic effect in the maelstrom of war in Iraq where determined armed opposition to the US occupation intersects with a widening sectarian conflict between Sunni and Shiite militias.

An article in the *Washington Post* on Monday underscored the complexities of dealing with shifting tribal loyalties and rivalries. It revealed bitter divisions in the US-backed Anbar Salvation Council. Ali Hatem Ali Suleiman, a leader of the Dulaim confederation, the largest tribal organisation in Anbar, denounced the most prominent figure in the council, Abdul Sattar Abu Risha, as “a traitor” who “sells his beliefs, his religion and his people for money”. As Anthony Cordesman, an analyst with the Centre for Strategic Studies, commented: “The question with a group like this always is, does it stay bought?”

Regardless of its effectiveness, the Pentagon’s new tactic makes a mockery of the Bush administration’s claims to be disarming militias and building a stable, sovereign, democratic Iraq. In opening up negotiations and concluding alliances with Sunni Arab

tribes and militias, the US military is effectively undermining the Shiite-dominated government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in Baghdad. Many of the groups currently receiving American arms were connected with the Sunni-based Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein and are deeply hostile to the Maliki government.

As the *New York Times* noted: “American commanders say the Sunni groups they are negotiating with show few signs of wanting to work with the Shiite-led government... For their part, Shiite leaders are deeply suspicious of any American move to co-opt Sunni groups that are wedded to a return of Sunni political dominance.” Yet, if the “Anbar model” is any guide, American negotiations involve not just a military alliance, but a political perspective for the tribal sheikhs to eventually control the provincial administration and have a greater say in Baghdad.

The arming of Sunni Arab militia is taking place within a broader context. Confronted with overwhelming opposition to the war and a profound political crisis at home, the Bush administration appears to be considering refashioning, but not ending, the US occupation. The *Washington Post* reported on Sunday that US military commanders are drawing up initial plans for the withdrawal of two-thirds of US troops by late 2008 or early 2009. The remaining soldiers would form a garrison force that would secure US economic and strategic interests in Iraq for years, if not decades to come.

Such proposals, however, confront Washington point blank with a political dilemma: what to do about the Maliki government? In its reckless and criminal invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Bush administration relied heavily on Shiite and Kurdish opponents of the Hussein regime in forming its various puppet regimes. The US occupation has not only destabilised Iraq and fuelled a sectarian civil war, but profoundly altered relations throughout the region. As it ratchets up the pressure on neighbouring Iran, the White House is dependent on a government in Baghdad dominated by Shiite parties with longstanding religious and political ties to the Iranian theocracy.

Any reduction of US forces in Iraq would inevitably strengthen the influence of the Maliki government, which the Bush administration clearly does not trust to safeguard American interests, particularly in the event of a US military conflict with Iran. Within months of Maliki’s installation in May 2006, the first dark hints appeared in the American press indicating that the new government might be removed in a US-backed military coup. While that option appears to have been placed on hold, the Bush

administration, as part of its “surge” strategy, has repeatedly insisted that the Maliki government measure up to a series of US “benchmarks”.

Stripped of their diplomatic gloss, these benchmarks boil down to two basic demands: firstly, to pass an oil law to open up Iraq’s vast reserves to American corporations and, secondly, to refashion the Iraqi government and state bureaucracy to incorporate sections of the Sunni elite that held power under the previous Baathist regime. Neither of these benchmarks has been met. The first is bogged down in acrimonious wrangling between the Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish elites over the sharing of oil revenues. The second is mired in the mistrust of Shiite leaders toward former Baathists, compounded by hostilities engendered by a bloody sectarian war that has claimed tens of thousands of lives.

Washington’s “benchmarks” are increasingly taking the form of ultimatums. On Sunday, the new head of US Central Command, Admiral William Fallon, met with Maliki in Baghdad to reinforce the message that progress was expected before the Bush administration’s promised report to Congress in September. As a *New York Times* reporter who was permitted into the meeting explained, Fallon pressed Maliki to “reach out to his [Sunni] opponents” and focussed on the passage of the oil law by July. Two days later, former US ambassador to Iraq and now Deputy Secretary of State, John Negroponte, visited Iraq and met with Maliki to make the same demands.

Aside from any immediate military motivation, the arming of Sunni militias and the establishment of “salvation councils” in key Sunni provinces is one means of corroding the influence of the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad. US military support for these militias and tribal groups is establishing alternative centres of power at the regional level in opposition to the Maliki regime.

In comments on Sunday, Major-General Rick Lynch was openly critical of the Maliki government, saying he was concerned “whether or not that government is a truly representative government”. He objected to the interference of national officials in freeing, on what he claimed was a political or sectarian basis, detainees rounded up by US troops. He said the US military was trying to persuade the Maliki government to establish “provisional police forces” from Sunni militia, adding that the plan would go ahead even without government backing.

Lynch made clear just whom the US is recruiting in comments in Monday’s *New York Times* article. After declaring that American commanders faced difficult choices, he pointed out that some of the Sunni groups make no secret of their hostility to the US occupation. “They say, ‘We hate you because you are occupiers, but we hate Al Qaeda worse, and we hate the Persians even more,’” Lynch explained.

This last reference is to the Shiite-dominated Maliki government, which Sunni extremists regard as nothing more than a pawn of Iran, or Persia. The Sunni parties and militias in Iraq are not alone. Washington’s closest regional allies—including the autocratic regimes of Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt—are bitterly resentful that the US invasion of Iraq removed the Sunni-based Baathist regime, which they regarded as a bulwark against Iranian and Shiite influence in the Middle East. In talks with Vice President Dick Cheney last November, Saudi king Abdullah reportedly

threatened to actively back Sunni militias in a sectarian war against the Maliki government in the event of a US withdrawal from Iraq.

Aside from the immediate short-term military considerations, it is not yet clear what the Bush administration’s broader plan is in the risky business of arming Sunni insurgents—or indeed if it has a strategy at all. It could be a means to pressure the Maliki government to meet Washington’s demands, or to lay the basis for a carve-up of Iraq on a sectarian basis into Kurdish, Sunni and Shiite regions. It is also possible that Pentagon planners have the “Afghan model” in mind—a country fractured among a myriad of local and regional warlords, militia commanders and tribal leaders, presided over by a largely powerless national government whose writ does not extend much beyond Kabul.

Whatever the exact political calculations, the Bush administration is playing with fire. By actively arming and backing Sunni extremists who regard the “Persians” in Baghdad as their mortal enemies, the US military is setting the stage for a further intensification of the country’s sectarian conflict. Perhaps this is part of US planning. Faced with a choice between a pro-Iranian regime in Baghdad and the descent of the country into civil war, the White House may be tending toward the latter.

In opposition to the demand for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of foreign troops from Iraq, the objection is often raised that the outcome would be chaos, civil strife and a catastrophe for the Iraqi people. The Pentagon’s latest tactic simply confirms that the greatest factor fuelling sectarian violence in Iraq is the US occupation itself. The very last consideration in any of the Bush administration’s manoeuvres is the social, economic and political disaster that its criminal invasion has created for the Iraqi population.



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