

# US pressure on Iraqi parliamentary factions to enact “benchmarks”

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The Sunni Iraqi Accordance Front (IAF), which holds 44 of the 275 seats in the Iraqi parliament, announced an end to its boycott of the legislature last week. The Bush administration pushed for the IAF’s return to secure the passage of legislation it is demanding in time for a progress report on the Iraq war to Congress in September. Accounts in the Arab and US press indicate that Washington demanded that the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki make overtures to the Sunni IAF to end its boycott.

The most sought after of the 18 “benchmarks” is US-drafted legislation that will end the Iraqi state monopoly on the country’s oil resources and open them up for exploitation by American and other transnational energy companies. Laws covering both foreign investment into the oil industry and revenue-sharing arrangements between Iraq’s federal, regional and provincial governments have been tabled in the parliament, but not voted on. Boycotts by the IAF and the Shiite bloc loyal to cleric Moqtada al-Sadr have prevented the constitutionally required quorum of 139 legislators being reached in recent parliamentary sessions.

The boycotts have also held up a vote to repeal “de-Baathification” laws that exclude thousands of former members of Saddam Hussein’s regime from holding political or military posts. The marginalisation of the predominantly Sunni Arab elite was initially US policy after the 2003 invasion, but rapidly became a factor in the ongoing insurgency against US forces. By offering former Baathists a place in the new Iraqi state, US strategists are convinced that a number of Sunni-based organisations would end their armed resistance and collaborate with the US occupation. Provincial elections are due by the end of the year, enabling Sunni parties to take control of provincial governments in

majority Sunni areas—and the associated power and privileges.

The IAF walked out on June 23 over the removal of one of its leaders, Mahmoud al-Mashhadani, as the parliamentary speaker. Behind the boycott was the lack of any progress on de-Baathification and opposition among Sunni legislators to aspects of the oil laws. In particular, they have objected to the control being given to regional and provincial governments over production contracts for undeveloped oil fields within their jurisdiction. The fear in Sunni political circles is that unless the central government wields control, revenues will largely flow to the governing authorities in the Shiite south and Kurdish north where most of Iraq’s known oil reserves are located. The majority Sunni provinces have little in the way of discovered oil.

The concessions made to the IAF are primarily political but hold out the prospect of more substantial rewards. Its position has been enhanced by the inclusion of the presidential council in executive policy making. The council consists of the Kurdish president, Jalal Talabani, and the two vice-presidents, pro-US Shiite leader Adel Abdul Mehdi and IAF leader Tariq al-Hashemi. US ambassador Ryan Crocker announced last Thursday that the council is now meeting weekly with Maliki, effectively bypassing his fractious cabinet. According to the *Washington Post*, Bush insisted that Talabani, Mehdi and Hashemi were present during his recent video conferences with Maliki.

The *Post* reported that US officials touted the creation of the four-man council, above and apart from cabinet and parliament, as a “forum to develop consensus on broader political issues”—in other words, to get the US benchmarks adopted. Whether it can is unclear. Crocker told the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on Thursday that the group was having

“significant difficulties”. The Kurdish, Sunni and Shiite leaders were finding it “pretty hard to make sweeping compromises”, Crocker stated, because of their mutually opposed demands.

All factions are under intense pressure from Washington. On Friday, Maliki issued an appeal to parliament to either cancel or shorten its month-long vacation scheduled to begin at the end of July so as many as 50 pieces of draft legislation related to the US benchmarks can be voted on. IAF spokesman Ayad I-Sammarraie indicated to the *New York Times* on Sunday that the Sunni coalition was prepared to negotiate a solution to the current deadlock.

The IAF’s return to parliament is one sign that segments of the Sunni establishment are seeking to make peace with the US occupation. Sunni tribal sheiks, disgruntled after four years of war and economic marginalisation, are now cooperating with the US military against radical Sunni insurgents in the provinces of Anbar, Diyala, Salah al Din and parts of western Baghdad. In exchange, the tribes are being permitted to flood the local police with their loyalists and openly maintain militias, despite the opposition of Maliki’s Shiite and Kurdish-dominated government.

In sharp contrast, the main Sunni insurgent groups have ruled out any end to their armed resistance as long as any American or foreign troops remain in Iraq. Insurgent leaders interviewed in the British-based *Guardian* on July 19 stated that seven guerilla organisations are about to announce a common political program: the withdrawal of all foreign forces; US compensation for the destruction wreaked on the country; the repudiation of all laws passed under US occupation; and the formation of a transitional regime made up only of opponents of the US invasion.

The most extreme Sunni groups are targeting tribal leaders who are collaborating with the US. In the latest incident, a suicide bomber on Sunday attempted to drive an explosive-filled van into a building in Taji, north of Baghdad, where local sheiks were taking part in US-brokered talks. Five people were killed and 13 wounded. The violence is expected to intensify over the coming months.

The Shiite Sadrist movement also announced an end to its boycott of the parliament two days before the Sunni IAF. The Sadrists hold 30 seats in the parliament and walked out last month in protest at the Maliki

government’s failure to prevent the June 13 sectarian bombing of the Al-Askariya mosque in Samarra, one of the most important sites of the Shiite branch of Islam. They have returned following assurances that the mosque would be rebuilt, and reportedly at the request of Iraq’s main Shiite cleric, Ali al-Sistani.

The Sadrists are functioning as a lightning rod for the mass opposition toward the occupation and the Maliki government, particularly among the Shiite working class and urban poor. Nassar Al Rubaie, a spokesman for Sadr, declared earlier this month that the oil law would “undermine Iraq’s sovereignty in the short run and will strip it of its sovereignty in the long run”. Sadrist representatives have denounced the ending of de-Baathification as a plan to allow “assassins” to regain political influence. Tens of thousands of Shiite opponents of the Baathist regime were murdered during Hussein’s rule.

At the same time, the Sadrists are providing legitimacy to the parliamentary charade taking place in Baghdad. Even if the Sadrists oppose the oil law themselves, their presence in the chamber helps guarantee a quorum to enable the combined votes of rival Shiite factions, the Kurdish parties and the IAF to push through US demands. In return, the Sadrist leadership is hoping to enhance its own power and privileges within the political framework established by the US occupation.



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