

Sharp tensions between US military and Iraqi prime minister

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3 August 2007

Relations have all but broken down between General David Petraeus, the US military commander in Iraq, and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Rumours of furious arguments between the two men have been leaking out for well over a month. According to Iraqi politicians who spoke to the Associated Press last weekend, tensions reached the point where Maliki told Petraeus: “I can’t deal with you anymore. I will ask for someone to replace you.”

The source of the animosity is the Shiite prime minister’s opposition to one of the general’s key tactics in trying to curb the predominantly Sunni Arab insurgency being waged against the US military and the US-backed puppet government in Baghdad. Petraeus has encouraged his subordinates to offer amnesty, money and local political power to Sunni guerillas and tribal fighters who agree to cease their resistance to the American occupation.

Maliki views the amnesties to Sunni insurgents as a mortal threat to his government. The Sunni groupings involved make no secret of their hostility toward the Shiite parties. Most are comprised of Arab nationalist ex-members or sympathisers of Saddam Hussein’s Baath Party, which derived the bulk of its support from within the Sunni population. They consider the Shiite fundamentalist organisations that dominate the US-backed regime in Baghdad, such as Maliki’s Da’wa Party and the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council (SIIC), as little more than agents of neighbouring Iran.

Maliki and the Iraqi Shiite establishment have become increasingly anxious and perturbed as Petraeus has pushed ahead. Initially, the policy began as a pragmatic attempt to lessen attacks on American troops in the volatile western province of Anbar. A Sunni tribal council was granted effective control over the city of Ramadi in exchange for assisting US operations against more diehard insurgents—whom the US military universally label as “Al

Qaeda”.

The overtures to Sunni tribes and resistance groups have since taken place on a broader scale. Deals are being struck with groups in the suburbs of Baghdad and majority Sunni areas of the surrounding provinces of Diyala, Salahuddin and Babil. Thousands of men who probably fought American and Iraqi government troops at some time over the past four years are now being paid by US officers to serve as “neighbourhood watches”, “provisional police” or “emergency response units”.

By proceeding this way, the US military has ridden roughshod over the concerns of the Iraqi government, making a mockery of White House claims that Maliki heads a democratically elected government and a sovereign state. The reality is that Maliki is utterly powerless to prevent Petraeus handing over large parts of the country to Sunni forces, which reject his authority and are committed to overthrowing his regime. His objections have been shouted down by the US general and dismissed out of hand by the Bush administration.

Sectarian tensions between Sunnis and Shiites, which have already led to thousands of deaths and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis being driven from their homes, are being inflamed as a result. Sami Askari, an aide to Maliki, told the *Los Angeles Times* last week that US policy toward Sunni insurgents was “the seed for civil war”.

In a video conference with Bush last month, the frustrated Iraqi prime minister allegedly threatened to arm Shiite militias if Petraeus continued to aid Sunni opponents of his government. Bush’s contemptuous response was to tell Maliki to “calm down”. The US military has ordered Shiite-dominated units of the Iraqi army to keep out of areas where their newly-recruited Sunni forces are active but already there have been near-clashes. The *New York Times* reported on July 16 that American troops called in helicopter gunships and aimed their weapons at Shiite soldiers to prevent them from

attacking former Sunni guerillas in a Baghdad suburb.

Within the Iraqi parliament, Sunni parties have been emboldened to break with the Maliki government. After boycotting parliament for more than a month, the main Sunni bloc, the Iraqi Accordance Front (IAF), announced on Wednesday it was withdrawing its ministers from the cabinet after Maliki rejected an 11-point list of demands. The demands included greater Sunni influence over the Iraqi security forces, a purge of Shiite fundamentalist loyalists from the new Iraqi army and the release of thousands of Sunnis who have been detained for allegedly taking part in or supporting the anti-occupation insurgency. Behind the scenes, the IAF is seeking to form a coalition with Kurdish parties, secular formations and Shiite opponents of Maliki, an alliance that could potentially unseat the government.

With the situation growing more volatile each week, the American media is studiously avoiding any examination of the contradictions that surround the US military's dealings with Sunni tribes and resistance movements, or their broader implications.

Petraeus has claimed such organisations are collaborating with his forces because they have come to view Al Qaeda-inspired Sunni extremists as a more immediate challenge to their interests than the US occupation. Ex-Baathists and tribal militias engaged in a power struggle with religious-based Sunni groupings have accepted US money, logistics and military support to destroy their rivals.

The conflict between Sunni factions serves to underscore the absurdity of US assertions that Al Qaeda has been the principal protagonist in the four-year anti-occupation guerilla war. Al Qaeda's brand of Islamic reaction is viewed with hostility by the main Iraqi resistance organisations, whose perspective is not the establishment of a Sunni Islamic caliphate—as Bush repeatedly asserts—but to be rid of the US occupation. There is no guarantee that the ostensible Sunni allies of the US military will not again turn their guns on American troops.

The attitude of these Sunni factions will depend on whether the Bush administration continues to support the Maliki government, which they consider an even greater threat than Sunni religious extremists. General Rick Lynch, one of Petraeus's commanders, reported in June that Sunni tribal leaders in Anbar province were bluntly telling him: "We hate you because you are occupiers, but we hate Al Qaeda worse, and we hate the Persians [i.e., Iran and the Iraqi Shiite parties] even more."

The fact that the US occupation is facilitating the rise of Sunni militias suggests that the White House has given up on its stated goal of establishing a strong central government in Iraq and may well prefer that the country disintegrates into warring regions. From the standpoint of US aims to dominate the Middle East and its resources, the current political arrangement is untenable. Maliki heads a regime dominated by Shiite fundamentalist parties that are at odds with rival Sunni, Kurdish and Shiite factions. The result has been paralysis in the parliament. Maliki's government has proven incapable of meeting any of the US demands, particularly an oil law that would legitimise the opening up of Iraq's oil industry to foreign investment and takeover.

Of equal or greater concern in Washington, the Iraqi Shiite parties maintain their long-standing political links and religious affinities with the Iranian regime. With regional Sunni-led states such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt barely concealing their hostility toward Maliki and sympathy for the Sunni insurgents, Iran stands out as the only regional ally the Maliki government can look to. Under conditions where the Bush administration is engaged in a diplomatic and potential military confrontation with Tehran, doubts exist in US political circles as to the wisdom of leaving the Iraqi state in Maliki's hands. In the event of war with Iran, US military analysts have expressed fears that US troops and supply lines in Iraq could be attacked by Shiite militias or by US-armed Shiite units of the army and police.

Such calculations undoubtedly lie behind the promotion of Sunni militias, as well as incessant US demands that Sunni figures be placed in more prominent roles in the government and the Iraqi security forces. Petraeus and his officers are assembling a counter-weight to Shiite armed strength, while the White House is seeking to cultivate a potential alternative to Shiite political dominance. In doing so, the US is only fuelling the sectarian war in Iraq that has already led to immense death and destruction.



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