

Amid calls from Clinton and Levin, US moves to oust Iraqi prime minister

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Open calls by Democratic Party leaders this week for the removal of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, combined with ongoing expressions of frustration by Bush administration officials, indicate that the Iraqi government's days are numbered. Moves are underway in Washington and Baghdad to remove Maliki when the Iraqi parliament returns from a summer break on September 4.

Carl Levin, the Democratic Party chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, told journalists at a press conference on Tuesday: "I hope that the Iraqi assembly, when it reconvenes in a few weeks, will vote the Maliki government out of office and will have the wisdom to replace it with a less sectarian and a more unifying prime minister and government."

His statement followed a two-day visit to Iraq, during which he and Republican Senator John Warner held talks with the US ambassador Ryan Crocker, US military commander General David Petraeus and the leaders of Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish factions who would have to support a no-confidence motion to sack Maliki.

Hillary Clinton, the leading Democrat contender for the 2008 presidential nomination, endorsed Levin's comments yesterday. In a formal statement, Clinton declared: "During his trip to Iraq last week, Senator Levin... confirmed that the Iraqi government is nonfunctional and cannot produce a political settlement because it is too beholden to religious and sectarian leaders. I share Senator Levin's hope that the Iraqi parliament will replace Prime Minister Maliki with a less divisive and more unifying figure when it returns in a few weeks."

Clinton and Levin are the most senior US politicians to openly advocate dispensing with Maliki. In doing so, however, they are serving as the sounding board for a view that is widely held in the American political and media establishment, including the Bush administration. Crocker pointedly declared this week that Maliki's performance as prime minister had been "extremely disappointing".

At a press conference on Tuesday, Bush declared that "the Iraqis will decide" whether or not to remove Maliki. "They have decided they want a constitution, they have elected members to their parliament, and they will make the decisions, just like democracies do," he said. In reality, the Iraqi people will have no influence in determining Maliki's fate. The

country is not a sovereign "democracy". It is under American military occupation. The government in Baghdad is little more than a puppet regime. US interests—expressed through diplomatic means and if necessary by military ones—will ultimately determine who sits as its head.

The overriding issue in Washington since the 2003 invasion has been which political forces in Iraq can best serve the US aims of plundering the country's energy resources and using its territory as a springboard for further wars of aggression against Iran, Syria and other perceived obstacles to US domination of the Middle East.

By these criteria, Maliki and his Shiite-dominated government have fallen out of favour. Throughout this year, the Iraqi prime minister has faced constant condemnation from the Bush administration for failing to meet the so-called "benchmarks" imposed as part of the "surge" of 30,000 additional US troops to try to stabilise the US occupation of Iraq. Moreover, Maliki, a Shiite fundamentalist with political and religious sympathies for the Shiite regime in Iran, is considered an unreliable ally under conditions of escalating US tensions with Tehran.

The key benchmarks required Maliki to pass legislation to allow foreign investment in the country's oil industry and repeal a law excluding thousands of predominantly Sunni Arab members of Saddam Hussein's Baath Party from public office or military posts. An end to what is known as "de-Baathification" is one of Bush administration's overtures to convince ex-Baathist and Sunni insurgents to end their armed resistance. Four-and-a-half years after the invasion, the US military still has to maintain over 150,000 troops in the country under conditions where the majority of Americans oppose the war and want it ended.

Maliki, however, has been unable to get the Shiite United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) to agree to US demands for concessions to the former Sunni ruling elite. Any retreat from de-Baathification has been opposed by Shiite clerical leaders and legislators who suffered brutal repression at the hands of Hussein's regime and are not prepared to see their current power and privileges eroded by the return of the old Baathist establishment.

Instead, the conflicts between the rival factions of the Iraqi

elite are being fought out in a vicious civil war, which has effectively blocked any agreement on issues such as the future of the oil industry. Sunni and Shiite militias have “cleansed” entire suburbs and districts of members of the opposing sect, killed thousands of people and turned close to two million into internally displaced refugees. Many Sunni Iraqis have come to view most of the Iraqi army and police as little more than Shiite death squads with American-supplied equipment and uniforms.

Within this context, a discernable US shift has been taking place. From primarily relying on Shiite parties as the foundation for the Iraqi state and security forces since 2003, Washington has increasingly cultivated a base of support in Sunni areas. General Petraeus has ordered the US military to bypass Maliki and carry out its own policy of “reconciliation” with Sunni insurgents.

Tens of millions of dollars have been handed out to various tribes and guerilla groups for ceasing attacks on US troops in exchange for an amnesty and assisting the US military to hunt down fighters who refuse to be bought off. Tens of thousands of Sunni militiamen—outside the structures of the Iraqi security forces—are now being directly paid by the American government. In effect, a large swathe of western and central Iraq has been handed over to Sunni warlords who until recently were fighting the US occupation and are continuing to support the civil war against the Shiite-led government.

At the same time as assisting Sunni armed groups, Petraeus has ordered a series of attacks on the strongholds of the largest Shiite militia, the Mahdi Army of cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, alleging that it is being armed and trained by Iran to carry out sectarian violence and attacks on US troops. In June, the Sadrist movement responded to the popular Shiite outrage over the attacks on the militia and walked out of the government. US operations into Shiite areas have only intensified in the weeks since. “Iranian-backed” Shiite militias, not Sunni fundamentalist groups supposedly linked to Al Qaeda, are now being demonised as the greatest threat to the American military.

The policies accompanying the US surge have emboldened the Sunni-based parliamentary factions to try to force the formation of a new government in which they would control the main levers of power. In July, the Sunni Iraqi Accordance Front denounced Maliki as a sectarian Shiite regime and instructed its ministers to resign from his cabinet. This month, ministers from former interim prime minister Iyad Allawi’s Iraqi National List announced a boycott of cabinet meetings.

When the parliament resumes in less than two weeks, Maliki will face a hostile chamber. Following the walkouts from the cabinet, his government is openly opposed by 58 members of Sunni Arab parties; the 25 members of the so-called secular alliance headed by Allawi; and the 15 members of the Basra-based Shiite Islamic Virtue Party (Fadhila).

Constitutionally, the votes of just 25 percent of the 275 legislators are required to move a no-confidence motion. If the motion is supported by a simple majority of 138, the president,

Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani, must call for the election of a new prime minister and the formation of a new cabinet. Maliki is formally backed by only some 80 legislators who remain within the Shiite UIA. The 53 Kurdish nationalist legislators have not indicated how they would vote. Nor has the government’s main Shiite rival, the 32-member Sadrist bloc loyal to cleric Moqtada al-Sadr.

How the various cliques and factions in the Iraqi parliament ultimately line up in any no confidence vote will be decided by a process of diplomacy, threats and bribery over the next several weeks, in which ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus have been and will be principal players.

Iyad Allawi, however, a former Baathist turned CIA operative who has collaborated for three decades with US intrigues in the Middle East, is receiving undisguised backing in the US as the best candidate for Iraqi prime minister. The *Washington Post* published an opinion piece by Allawi on Saturday, in which he outlined a six-point “Plan for Iraq”.

His plan, not surprisingly, dovetails completely with US interests and demands. Its key elements include Maliki’s removal; the declaration of martial law across most of the country; an offensive against sectarian elements, i.e., Shiite militias, in the security forces; “telling Iran to end its interference in Iraq”; and an immediate end to de-Baathification in the name of “reconciliation”.

Should the Iraqi parliament fail to form a government acceptable to Washington, other options exist. Over the past 12 months, a number of articles have appeared in the American media referring to discussions in the Bush administration over organising a military coup against Maliki.

US imperialism has a record of using such methods to dispense with unsatisfactory puppet regimes. In 1963, frustrated with the failure of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem to crush the Viet Cong liberation movement, the Kennedy administration encouraged dissident factions of the army to seize the presidential palace, murder Diem and impose a dictatorship that was subservient to US plans for a massive build-up of American troops and the intensification of the war.



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