US intelligence report points to Iraqi government's removal

Peter Symonds
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The National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iraq released last week reflects a growing consensus not just among the US spy agencies, but in the White House and American ruling elite, that the main obstacle to the US agenda in Iraq is the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

Not surprisingly, the four-page unclassified portion of the NIE drawn up by 16 US intelligence agencies backs the Bush administration's "surge" strategy. The report highlighted "measurable but uneven improvements in Iraq's security situation since the last estimate in January 2007" and predicted further "modest" gains as long as US troops remained and aggressive military operations continued.

Nevertheless, despite its muted, conservative language, the NIE painted a grim picture of the US occupation. "[T]he level of overall violence, including attacks on and casualties among civilians, remains high; Iraq's sectarian groups remain unreconciled; AQI [Al Qaeda in Iraq] retains the ability to conduct high-profile attacks; and, to date, Iraqi political leaders remain unable to govern effectively," it stated.

The final comment about the Maliki government reflects the frustration in US ruling circles over the failure of the 2003 invasion to transform the country into a stable client state and to open up its vast oil reserves for exploitation by American corporations. Just weeks before Washington's top general and its senior diplomat in Baghdad are due to report to the US Congress, none of the Bush administration's so-called benchmarks, including the passage of oil laws, has been met.

Without openly calling for Maliki's removal, the logic of the NIE's "judgments" certainly leads to that conclusion. The report notes the US military's gains in enlisting the support of Sunni tribes and some insurgents in fighting so-called Al Qaeda groups, but highlights the failure of the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad to reach any accommodation with these new Sunni allies. "[W]e judge these initiatives will only translate into widespread political accommodation and enduring stability if the Iraqi government accepts and supports them," it warned.

The NIE also "assessed" that the position of Maliki would become "more precarious" over the next six to 12 months because of criticism by Shiite parties, as well as Sunni and Kurdish parties. The Iraqi government would "continue to struggle to achieve national-level political reconciliation and improved governance" over the same period. The NIE highlighted the need for "a fundamental shift in the factors driving Iraqi political and security developments" for long-term progress to be made—the most obvious "shift" being Maliki's removal.

The NIE document followed a barrage of comments in Washington last week expressing dissatisfaction with the Maliki government. After a two-day visit to Iraq, Carl Levin, the Democratic Party chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, openly called for the Iraqi parliament to replace Maliki with "a less sectarian and a more unifying prime minister". Leading presidential contender, Hillary Clinton, publicly endorsed Levin's remarks a day later.

President Bush stopped short of openly calling for Maliki to go. Yet, while nominally continuing to support the Iraqi prime minister, he declared last Tuesday: "The fundamental question is: Will the government respond to the demands of the people? If the government doesn't respond to the demands of the people, they will replace the government." The US ambassador to Iraq, Ryan Crocker, added his own damning assessment of the Baghdad government last week as "extremely disappointing".

The appeal to the "demands of the Iraqi people" is simply absurd—the vast majority of Iraqis are opposed to continued US occupation of their country. The moves against Maliki are determined by the shifting requirements of US strategy not only in Iraq but more broadly throughout the Middle East. The Bush administration backed the Shiite and Kurdish parties that form the Maliki government as a means for ousting Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime, which rested on Iraq's Sunni Arab elite. However, having provoked an anti-US insurgency and a sectarian civil war between Sunni and Shiite militias, the White House is now demanding that Baghdad accommodates sections of the ousted Baathist

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regime in order to divide the Sunni insurgency.

More fundamentally, as the Bush administration escalates its confrontation with neighbouring Iran, the Maliki government, with its ties to Tehran, has become untenable as far as Washington is concerned. In recent weeks, the White House and the Pentagon have stepped up the propaganda blitz against Iran over its alleged nuclear weapons programs and unsubstantiated claims that it is assisting attacks by Shiite militia on US troops. Maliki is also an obstacle to US attempts to forge an anti-Iranian alliance of so-called Sunni states in the Middle East such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt that are bitterly opposed to the Shiite regime in Baghdad.

Maintaining the thrust of US propaganda, the NIE repeated the allegation of Iranian "interference" in Iraq. "Assistance to armed groups, especially from Iran, exacerbates the violence inside Iraq, and the reluctance of the Sunni states that are generally supportive of US regional goals to offer support to the Iraqi government probably bolsters Iraqi Sunni Arabs' rejection of the government's legitimacy," it stated.

Maliki reacted sharply to the public calls for his removal, describing the comments of Clinton and Levin as "discourteous". In an obvious reference to the Bush administration's "benchmarks", he declared: "No one has the right to place timetables on the Iraq government." Speaking during a visit to Syria, Maliki said he would "find friends elsewhere" if he were abandoned by the US. Far from warding off a move against his government, this last remark, hinting at a turn to Tehran and Damascus, will only strengthen Washington's resolve to refashion the Baghdad regime.

The Bush administration's dissatisfaction with the Iraqi government has been evident for months, encouraging Maliki's rivals to move against him. Since the beginning of the year, there have been walkouts from the cabinet by the Basra-based Shiite Islamic Virtue Party (Fadhila), the Shiite bloc loyal to cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and the major Sunni Arab factions. On Saturday, the Iraqi National List of former interim prime minister Iyad Allawi formally announced its withdrawal after previously boycotting cabinet meetings.

In preparation for parliament's resumption early next month, all the Iraqi factions are engaged in intense backroom manoeuvring. Maliki is attempting to shore up the current ruling Shiite-Kurdish bloc, while his rivals are preparing for a vote of no confidence. None of this has anything to do with the "will of the Iraqi people". All the Iraqi parties are well aware that the final decision on the fate of Maliki's government will be taken in Washington, not Baghdad.

Significantly, one of the main contenders for the prime minister's post, Iyad Allawi, has hired high-profile lobbying firm Barbour Griffith & Rogers for six months at the cost of $300,000 to "provide strategic counsel and representation" before "the US government, Congress, media and others". Central to Allawi's campaign in Washington is President Bush's former envoy to Iraq, Ambassador Robert Blackwill, who is the firm's president, as well as other top Bush administration aides, including Philip Zelikow, a former adviser to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

Blackwill, who also served as Bush's ambassador to India, is a senior figure in the US foreign affairs establishment. He was Rice's mentor before she took office. As Bush's adviser on Iraq in 2004, Blackwill played a crucial role in installing Allawi as head of the interim government. While the Bush administration now insists that Blackwill is operating as a private citizen, there is little doubt that the White House has given the green light for his campaign against Maliki.

Allawi, who received virtually no support in the 2005 Iraqi elections, was a loyal political thug for Saddam Hussein's regime before breaking away and becoming a longtime CIA asset. He has close relations with sections of the Baathist party, particularly in the military and intelligence. In a policy statement published in the *Washington Post* on August 18, Allawi laid out a six-point "Plan for Iraq", in which he declared he would impose a state of emergency on Baghdad and all conflict areas and carry out a far-reaching restructuring of the Iraqi security forces.

Allawi is not the only possibility being contemplated in Washington. But he certainly fits the bill as a political strongman who would not hesitate to carry out US orders and use every available means to crush opposition to his rule. That he is even under consideration is an indication of the type of regime that the Bush administration is seeking—with or without the approval of the Iraqi parliament. In its cautious criticisms of the present regime, the NIE document is another sign that, one way or another, Maliki's days are numbered.

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