

Iraq: Sunni party announces election boycott

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One of Iraq's leading Sunni parliamentarians, Saleh al-Mutlaq, announced Saturday that his party would boycott next month's parliamentary election. Mutlaq is among the 145 candidates barred from standing by the "de-Baathification" body, the Accountability and Justice Commission, headed by Ahmed Chalabi.

In a statement, Mutlaq's National Dialogue Front explained that its boycott was prompted by earlier denunciations of Chalabi as an effective Iranian agent by US General Ray Odierno and the US ambassador to Iraq Christopher Hill.

General Odierno triggered the furore last Tuesday when he appeared in Washington D.C. at the Institute for the Study of War. After the general spoke on "The Future of Iraq", Robert Dreyfuss of the *Nation* magazine declared, "You seem reluctant to talk about Iran's influence in Iraq", and asked whether Odierno agreed that "Iran has a lot more influence as the US drawdown approaches, and the US has a lot less".

Odierno utilised the provided opportunity to condemn former CIA-asset Chalabi and another senior figure in the Accountability and Justice Commission, Ali Faisal al-Lami. "He [al-Lami] and Chalabi clearly are influenced by Iran," the general declared. "We have direct intelligence that tells us that. They've had several meetings in Iran, meeting with a man named Mohandas ... who was on the terrorist watch list for a bombing in Kuwait in the 1980s. They are tied to him. He sits at the right-hand side of the Quds Force commandant, Qassem Soleimani. And we believe they're absolutely involved in influencing the outcome of the election. And it's concerning that they've been able to do that over time."

Within the framework of Washington's "war on terror", such allegations are more than sufficient to mark Chalabi out for arrest and detention by US forces. According to the MEMRI news translation website, Iraq's *Al-Rafidayn* newspaper last week cited unnamed Washington sources as saying that US military forces in Iraq may soon "seek an opportunity" to arrest Chalabi. The report remains unconfirmed.

Odierno described Chalabi's colleague al-Lami as a "Sadrist by trade" who "has been involved in very nefarious activities in

Iraq for some time". He explained that US forces had arrested him last year after receiving intelligence that he had directed improvised explosive attacks on occupying troops. Al-Lami was only released, Odierno said, as part of the "drawdown of our detention facilities" and because there was not sufficient evidence to prosecute.

These remarks were subsequently endorsed by Ambassador Hill. "I absolutely agree with General Odierno on this," he told an audience at the US Institute of Peace on Wednesday. "Absolutely these gentlemen [Chalabi and Lami] are affected by—are certainly under the influence of Iran... I also agree with [Odierno's] comments about the fact that we remain concerned about Iran's behaviour toward its neighbours. Iran needs to do a much better job of respecting its neighbour's sovereignty."

Hill's remarks were laced with the hypocrisy that is characteristic of official US military and government statements on Iraq. Seven years after the illegal invasion which led to the deaths of an estimated one million Iraqis and the catastrophic destruction of the country's economic and social infrastructure, more than 100,000 US troops are to oversee a carefully orchestrated national election. Yet it is Iran that must respect Iraqi "sovereignty".

Chalabi's Accountability and Justice Commission issued a statement rejecting Odierno's and Hill's accusations. "We flatly condemn these statements and consider it a flagrant interference in Iraqi domestic affairs," the statement read. "We can only remind General Odierno that he is a soldier and that the Iraqi elections are a domestic issue outside of the nature of his mission in Iraq."

Hill's and Odierno's statements are designed to advance US objectives in both Iran and Iraq. They follow Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's declaration last Monday that Iran was moving toward a "military dictatorship", with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps allegedly supplanting parliamentary and presidential authority. Odierno's provocative claim that Iran's Quds Force, the Revolutionary Guard's international paramilitary wing, is "absolutely involved in influencing the outcome of the [Iraqi] election" clearly forms part of Washington's efforts to escalate

international pressure on Tehran.

In Iraq, Odierno's and Hill's condemnation of Chalabi comes amid US concerns of a repeat of the 2005 election boycott of Sunni-based parties. Should this occur, the supposed legitimacy of the March 7 vote would be further discredited among ordinary Iraqis, raising the spectre of insurgents resuming large-scale armed resistance to the US-led occupation. This would throw into disarray the Obama administration's plan to transfer all but 50,000 of the US troops in Iraq to Afghanistan and other conflicts.

In January, Chalabi's Accountability and Justice Commission (formerly known as the National De-Baathification Committee) announced that more than 500 nominees for the election were banned. Washington quickly intervened, with Vice President Joe Biden visiting Baghdad on January 22 and 23 to urge that the decision, which had been endorsed by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, be overturned. But this has not happened. Following an appeals court ruling, the number of banned candidates was reduced to 145.

According to AFP, a spokesman for Saleh al-Mutlaq's National Dialogue Front said on Saturday that the decision to boycott the election "was taken following remarks made by General Ray Odierno, the top US army officer in Iraq, who alleged that the committee which barred Mutlaq from standing was controlled by Iran". Party spokesman Haider al-Mullah declared: "The National Dialogue Front cannot continue in a political process run by a foreign agenda."

It remains to be seen what impact the boycott decision will have on the election. The National Dialogue Front was standing in the election as part of the secular Sunni-Shia Iraqiya coalition slate headed by Iyad Allawi, the US-installed Iraqi prime minister in 2004–2005. Iraqiya is still participating in the poll, while the *New York Times* has reported that the leaders of Mutlaq's party in Kirkuk province have rejected their leader's boycott call. Moreover, Iraqi electoral authorities have said that the deadline for parties to withdraw has already passed and that ballot papers have been printed.

No other significant Sunni grouping has joined the National Dialogue Front's rejection of the ballot. US officials are no doubt working behind the scenes offering inducements and issuing threats to ensure maximum participation by the various communalist elites. Odierno's and Hill's statements form part of a broader campaign to ensure that the collaborationist Sunni forces have a significantly greater weight within Iraq's post-election coalition government. One result of the 2005 boycott was a disproportionate dominance of the parliament by Shia-based parties, all of which have connections of some description with Tehran.

Washington, which from the outset of the occupation of Iraq depended on the promotion and manipulation of sectarian and communalist divisions, is again seeking to tilt the balance of forces in Baghdad.

US dominance nevertheless remains tied to the massive military presence in the country. In his remarks to the Institute for the Study of War last week, General Odierno stressed that the Obama administration's plan to draw down forces would not affect the military's influence. Asked whether the US was adequately engaged in Iraq, he replied: "We have 98,000 soldiers on the ground—sailors, airmen and Marines. I consider that to be very, very engaged. We are spending billions of dollars in Iraq still today. We have the largest embassy in the world in Iraq. So we are engaged across several different levels."

Odierno said the plan to withdraw tens of thousands of troops before the end of the year was conditional on the security situation. "Contingency plans" allowed him to make recommendations to "maintain more force" as required. The general added: "50,000 soldiers is still a lot of US soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines. There's still a lot of US capability on the ground. And so it's not just we only have 50,000, it's that we have 50,000 on the ground. And I still think we can influence the outcome."

Odierno's remarks are an open admission about the neo-colonial character of the US-led occupation of Iraq and Washington's intention to remain "very, very engaged" into the indefinite future.



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