

Coup threat reported as Iraq government deadlock drags on

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With the deadlock in forming a new Iraqi government now entering its eighth month—a world's record—the Obama administration is intervening ever more openly and impatiently in pressuring rival political factions to cobble together a national unity coalition that would comprise all of the major parties.

Washington's concerns are twofold. In the first instance, US policymakers are anxious to see a functioning government, so that it can push through an agreement permitting the continued presence of tens of thousands of US troops after a formal deadline for a total withdrawal of US occupation forces at the end of next year. It also needs a negotiating partner for reaching deals allowing major US-based energy corporations to exploit the country's oil resources.

Secondly, the State Department and the Pentagon are determined to prevent the coalescence of a government dominated by Shiite religious parties that would strengthen Iran's influence. Fears that such a regime could emerge have been heightened since the announcement last month of an alliance between incumbent Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and the political movement led by radical Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr.

Previously Sadr had vehemently opposed Maliki, who had presided over a 2008 US-led military offensive to crush his Mahdi Army militia in Baghdad's sprawling Shia slum of Sadr City as well as in the southern city of Basra. It appeared likely that the surprising turnaround had been engineered at least in part by Iran, where Sadr has lived in self-imposed exile since 2007. It has also been reported that, in return for their support, the Sadrist had demanded that Maliki give them control of ministries governing the Iraqi security forces, as well as a definite number of patronage government jobs.

Citing Iraqi "officials familiar with negotiations" on forming a new government, the *New York Times* reported Monday that, "The administration has sought and received assurances that Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki will not offer the followers of Shiite cleric Moktada al-Sadr positions in charge of Iraq's security forces in exchange for supporting Mr. Maliki's bid for a second term in office."

The US administration has exerted considerable pressure on Maliki to curtail the influence of the Sadr movement, which registered significant gains in the election last March, winning 39 seats, thanks to its demand for an immediate end to the US military presence in the country.

In a press conference last week, US Ambassador James Jeffrey told reporters in Baghdad, "The problem that we see and that others see here—and I want to underline others see here—is that there is not clarity on whether the Sadr movement is a political movement or it is an armed militia which carries out political objectives through violent means. And a democracy can't tolerate that."

The election last March failed to produce a clear-cut winner. Iraqiya, a multi-party coalition supported by the country's Sunni minority and led by the former CIA asset Ayad Allawi, who was installed by the US occupation authorities as an interim prime minister in 2004, won the most votes and 91 seats in the 325-seat parliament. While Allawi claimed the right to form a government and assume the post of prime minister, his plurality fell far short of an outright majority, and he has proven unable to cobble together a workable coalition.

Maliki's State of Law bloc won only 89 seats, but appeared to be moving toward the formation of a Shiite majority government, despite bitter animosities between the rival Shiite parties.

Washington is pressuring for the Iraqiya bloc to join the government. Leaders of Iraqiya have given contradictory signals over the past week, with Allawi indicating to the *Wall Street Journal* that he was prepared to negotiate unity if all positions were open, while others suggested that the formation was willing to allow Maliki to hold on to the prime minister's post in return for significant power in the new government.

"We don't mind if al-Maliki is the prime minister, but we have to have a decision-making post," Sheik Adnan al-Danbous, a leading member of Iraqiya, told the Associated Press Sunday.

But it is far from clear how this would be accomplished. The Kurdish parties, which have 57 seats, control the presidency, presently occupied by Jalal Talabani, and have indicated that they do not intend to surrender it. They have utilized their power within the central government to pursue their goal of wresting virtual political and economic independence from Baghdad in the north of Iraq.

It seems likely that the backroom negotiations on a new government will persist for some time, and it is hardly assured that Allawi can deliver the support of his Sunni backers in supporting a Shiite-dominated administration in which they would have even less power than in the last government. With the government having jailed many Sunni leaders over the past several years and having reneged on its promises to integrate members of the US-aligned "Sons of Iraq" militias into the security forces, grant an amnesty and seek reconciliation with former Ba'athists, there is little trust in Maliki among the Sunni population.

US officials have cast their campaign for a broad coalition as an effort to prevent an exclusively Shiite government reigniting sectarian tensions into a new round of civil war.

"If a majority of each community is represented in the government, it makes it much less likely that Iraq would revert to sectarian violence or lurch into ethnic tension or ethnic violence," Antony Blinken, national security adviser to Vice President Joe Biden, the administration's point-man on Iraq, told the *Times*.

There is no doubt that the decimation of Iraqi society through nearly eight years of war and occupation has created this danger, which threatens Washington's own goals of installing a reliable client regime in Baghdad. The US is even more concerned, however, about the emergence of an Iraqi regime aligned with Iran.

Allawi has himself been campaigning on this question in the aftermath of the election, seeking to mobilize support from Washington and in the region. Last weekend, he and other Iraqiya leaders traveled to Saudi Arabia, where, according to an Iraqiya spokesman, they discussed "Iran's attempts to impose its dictations on the political parties in Iraq."

As the crisis in forming a new government drags on, there are growing warnings that the end result could be a coup by the Iraqi military.

Asharq Al-Awsat, the London-based pan-Arab newspaper, reported over the weekend that Maliki has ordered six divisions of the army to take up positions around Baghdad, while excluding other government officials from exercising authority over the military.

"We are not ruling out a military coup taking place, especially as the political history of Iraq is full of military coups," an Iraqi official told the paper. The military movements, he said, have given "rise to fears of a military coup in the event of al-Maliki not being able to remain as prime minister."

The paper also reported that, "US forces have given orders for US officers to join certain important military units in Baghdad as advisers...due to fears of an attempt to overthrow the government."

An Iraqi security official also told *Asharq Al-Awsat* that the military has become "completely politicized" with its officer corps sharply divided between those who "have obtained high military rank due to their studies at military academies and their long history of service, and the young officers that have obtained high rank due to their political or sectarian affiliations."

The newspaper also reported that Iraqi political leaders have fortified their offices and homes and restricted their movements in response to warnings from both Iraqi and US security personnel of a threatened coup.

The *New York Times* correspondent in Baghdad, Anthony Shadid, speaking to an audience at the University of Central Oklahoma last week, confirmed that "there is a lot of talk about a coup in Iraq, that the military may try to take power," according to the *Edmund Sun*, a local daily.

"I think there are a lot of people in Iraq right now that think this situation is not tenable," Shadid said. "There is an incredible amount of popular disenchantment and frustration with the political class in Iraq."

"I'm not saying that's gonna happen," the paper quoted Shadid as saying in relation to an Iraqi coup. "It's just a conversation that's going on out there."

Meanwhile, Haitham Al-Taib, a columnist for *Kitabat*, the Iraqi Arabic-language daily, suggested that this "conversation" may be taking place with the encouragement of Washington:

"After having watched the outcome of the March 2010 elections, the struggle of the parties for power and the way no one won an absolute majority, perhaps the Americans have begun to question the basis of the political equation and think it wiser to postpone plans for democracy. Another solution would be to hand over authority to the military.... American military leaders find appeal in the idea of having a general carry out a bloodless coup d'état like those that have occurred in Pakistan, with the promise of peaceful elections and a

return to democracy sometime down the road...the Americans assume that a general who executes the military coup d'état will be extremely obedient and execute the decisions of the American administration" (translation by WorldMeets.US <http://worldmeets.us/kitabat000050.shtml#axzz10JulpGzH>).

There is an objective logic to such a path. Having smashed the existing Ba'athist regime, which itself had its origins in a military-backed coup in 1968, the US imposed a brutal military occupation and counterinsurgency war upon Iraq that culminated in a vicious sectarian civil war.

Now, in its attempt to reduce its military "footprint" in order to free up US forces to fight in Afghanistan and elsewhere, the Pentagon has worked to build up the Iraq security forces to a strength of some 664,000, while striking deals to supply them with billions of dollars worth of arms, tanks and planes. At the same time, basic infrastructure and conditions of life for the masses of Iraqis have been allowed to steadily deteriorate, while the political regime is dominated by corruption, brutality and incompetence.

After concluding a \$4.2 billion arms contract that includes 18 F-16 warplanes, Sidewinder missiles and other equipment, the Pentagon stated that the arms would turn Iraq into "a more valuable partner in an important area of the world." The real "partner" it seeks is a puppet military prepared to suppress the population and aid the US in its pursuit of regional domination.

Last year, Thomas Ricks, author of the book *The Gamble*, on the US "surge" in Iraq, cited the Australian counterinsurgency expert and adviser to Gen. David Petraeus, David Kilcullen, as warning that "we are seeing the 'classic conditions for a military coup'—where a venal political elite divorced from the population lives inside the Green Zone, while the Iraqi military outside the zone's walls grows both more capable and closer to the people, working with them and trying to address their concerns."

Having waged a war that cost 4,425 US lives and those of more than a million Iraqis, at least in part in the name of bringing "democracy" to Iraq, it appears that Washington may well be searching for a new and more pliant version of Saddam Hussein.



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