Call for US intervention into Iraqi crisis

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Amid a deepening political crisis in Iraq that threatens to descend into sectarian warfare, the December 27 *New York Times* published a denunciation of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki by three leading figures in the Iraqiya coalition. Iraqiya leader Ayad Allawi, parliamentary speaker Osama al-Nujaifi, and Finance Minister Rafea al-Essawi used the column to appeal to the Obama administration to intervene and compel Maliki and the Shiite ruling Islamic Dawa party to accept a drastic reduction in their power.

The opinion piece accused Maliki of seeking to establish a "sectarian autocracy" and "create an authoritarian one-party state", of falsely accusing Iraqiya figures of terrorism and "specious links to insurgents", and of "welcoming into the political process" the "Iranian-sponsored Shiite group Asaib Ahl al-Haq", which waged armed resistance to the US occupation. It criticised the United States for having "continued to support Maliki" and "strengthen" his security forces, even though the Shiite parties had "reneged" on a power-sharing agreement.

According to the three Iraqiya leaders, the US occupation has created an Iraqi military and judiciary that protects a "self-serving sectarian regime" based on Shiite parties, who serve the interests of a "corrupt elite". They concluded: "[W]e respectfully ask America's leaders to understand that unconditional support for Mr. Maliki is pushing Iraq down the path of civil war. Unless America acts rapidly to help create a successful unity government, Iraq is doomed."

The airing of such a document by the *Times*—which is generally supportive of the Obama administration and whose editors have admitted that they consult with the State Department over what they will publish—is highly significant. It testifies to considerable concern in US ruling circles and the White House itself, with the political outcome of the nearly nine-year military occupation of Iraq, including the Maliki government's refusal to allow a permanent presence of US troops.

For public consumption, President Obama hailed Maliki barely three weeks ago on the White House lawn as the head of a "self-governing" and "inclusive" state with "enormous potential". In commentary by US think tanks and pundits, however, the Iraqi government is commonly denounced as being too sympathetic with Iran and to the Assad government in Syria.

The massive US diplomatic and intelligence presence in Iraq is doubtless actively involved in the intrigues and manoeuvring taking place in the country. A shift appears to be underway aimed at reversing the domination of the Iraqi government by Shiite parties, which is itself the outcome of US policies implemented after Saddam Hussein's regime was ousted in 2003.

The US occupation consciously promoted sectarian and ethnic divisions to divide the Iraqi masses and consolidate control. Shiite leaders and parties, with well-known links to Iran, were elevated into power in exchange for their collaboration against armed resistance. In northern Iraq, the Kurdish establishment was allowed to entrench an autonomous region with its own military apparatus. The Sunni establishment was marginalized, and Sunni areas were subjected to intense repression.

The US military escalation of 2007 was accompanied by a systematic campaign to split the Sunni insurgency, buying off a faction of tribal leaders, who formed the Awakening movement, and assassinating others. At the same time, the US crushed resistance in the Shiite areas, which had largely proceeded under the banner of the Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army. This paved the way for the Islamic Dawa party, historically tied to Iran, to play a greater role in Iraq's majority Shiite population.

The parliament that emerged from elections in March 2010 was riven with ethno-sectarian rivalries. Under US pressure, in December 2010 the Shiite parties

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agreed to a “national unity” government that gave ministries to each of the dominant groupings and, at least on paper, covered over the conflicts.

Ayad Allawi, a secular Shiite who came to the head of the largely Sunni-backed Iraqiya party, was particularly favoured in Washington for a prominent political role. A key CIA asset for decades before the US invasion, he was installed as the first interim prime minister of Iraq. The White House aggressively pushed Maliki to place Allawi in control of a National Security Council with oversight over the main security ministries.

Tensions have continually sharpened, however, during the course of 2011. Maliki ultimately refused to place Allawi or other Iraqiya leaders in charge of security ministries. In recent months hundreds of prominent Sunnis, who were members of Hussein’s Baath Party or officers in his military, have been detained for allegedly plotting against the government.

The ruling classes in majority-Sunni provinces responded by denouncing sectarian persecution and demanding the same local autonomy as the Kurdish region—raising the prospect of the de-facto partition of the country. Tensions reached a new peak of intensity over the past week since Maliki accused his Sunni Vice President, Tariq al Hashemi, of directing terrorist attacks and had an arrest warrant issued. A wave of bombings and killings has followed.

The crisis wracking Iraq has emerged not only within the context of the withdrawal of US combat troops, but the political upheavals across the region. Sunni claims that Maliki is essentially an Iranian puppet have dovetailed with similar allegations in Washington, ongoing US provocations against Iran and US backing for the Sunni-based tendencies in Syria seeking to overthrow President Bashar Assad.

The publication in a prominent American newspaper of Iraqiya’s denunciation of Maliki and calls for a redistribution of power suggest that this agenda is shared by influential elements in Washington. In a press briefing yesterday, State Department spokesman Mark Toner reported that the Obama administration had “conveyed the urgent need for the prime minister and the leaders of all the major blocs to meet and work through their differences”.

It cannot be ruled out that if the Shiite factions do not accept Sunni demands, which now include calls for new elections and Maliki’s removal as prime minister, the political crisis and rising sectarian violence could be used as the pretext for direct American military intervention. Tens of thousands of American troops are still stationed in Kuwait and other Gulf states.

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