

The Bush administration manoeuvres to unseat Iraqi government

By [Peter Symonds](#)

Global Research, March 18, 2007
www.wsws.org 16 March 2007

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

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Despite denials from Washington, there are growing signs that the Bush administration has issued threats to its puppet government in Baghdad to meet US-dictated “benchmarks” or face the consequences. The White House aims not only to end the military disaster in Iraq and open up the country’s oil for exploitation, but to fashion an Iraqi regime more supportive of US preparations for aggression against Iran.

Associated Press reported on Wednesday that Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki feared the Bush administration would “torpedo” his government if it failed to meet US demands. The article highlighted a US threat to withdraw support from the government if it failed to pass a draft hydrocarbons law by the end of June that would open up Iraqi oil and gas fields to American corporations.

In line with its efforts to forge an alliance of so-called Sunni states against Shiite Iran, Washington is also demanding a government in Baghdad by the end of the year “acceptable to the country’s Sunni Arab neighbours, particularly Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt”. These governments are concerned that the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the emergence of a Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad have bolstered Iran’s influence in Iraq and throughout the region.

The Arab League, which consists largely of states controlled by Sunni elites, issued a statement earlier this month demanding an end to anti-Sunni discrimination and measures to enhance the political role of the Sunni minority, which formed the social base of Hussein’s Baathist regime. The comments provoked an angry statement from the ruling Shiite United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), denouncing the Arab League for its “flagrant interference in Iraq’s internal affairs,” which would “incite discord and acts of violence inside Iraq”.

The US has reinforced “Sunni” demands by imposing “benchmarks” on the Maliki government, requiring a reversal of previous de-Baathification laws, fresh elections for regional councils and changes to the present Iraqi constitution. The measures would open the door for members of the Sunni elite to play a greater political role and resume their posts in the state bureaucracy and security forces.

The *New York Times* yesterday reported that the Maliki government had already failed to meet these objectives which were due to be completed this month. A Pentagon assessment submitted to the US Congress on Wednesday said Maliki had “promised to reform his government, beginning with his cabinet and ministries,” but there had been no changes as yet. It also pointed to “little progress on the reconciliation front [with Sunnis]” and modest steps toward finalising the oil legislation.

At the end of last month, the Maliki cabinet, under pressure from Washington, adopted an oil law aimed at ending the bitter differences over the internal sharing of revenues. But the legislation is yet to be passed by the national assembly, where it is opposed by two significant blocs—the Iraqi National List led by former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi and the Sunni-based Iraqi Accord Front. Both are demanding constitutional changes to enhance the position of Sunnis as the price for supporting the oil legislation.

As a result, Maliki is caught in a dilemma. Any concessions to the Sunni minority are bitterly opposed by the Shiite fundamentalist parties on which his ruling coalition rests. But if he fails to meet the Bush administration's "benchmarks," in particular the passage of the oil law by June, he risks the loss of American backing. "Al-Maliki is committed to meeting the deadline because he is convinced he would not survive in power without US support," one of his close associates told Associated Press.

Officially, the Bush administration has denied issuing any ultimatum to the Maliki government. "The notion that we have in any way, shape or form threatened to bring down his government over this law is simply untrue," US State Department spokesman Tom Casey told the media. Behind the scenes, however, US officials are not only insisting that the "benchmarks" have to be met, but are actively conniving with Allawi to undermine the Maliki government and prepare an alternative regime.

Allawi is a former Baathist thug who broke with the Hussein regime. A longstanding CIA asset, he was installed as prime minister in May 2004 by the US proconsul in Baghdad, Paul Bremer III, but failed dismally in national ballots. In the December 2005 election, Iraqis overwhelmingly repudiated Allawi's Iraqi National List (INL), which currently has only 25 seats in the National Assembly. After retiring to London, he then returned to Iraq and is attempting to make a comeback with obvious backing from Washington.

Allawi is positioning himself as the mouthpiece for the Bush administration's policies: opposing anti-Sunni discrimination, posturing as a "secular" alternative to Maliki's Shiite coalition and seeking support from neighbouring Arab states. His INL, which currently has five ministers, is threatening to pull out of Maliki's government if its demands are not met. In a statement issued on March 1, the bloc warned "it will soon no longer be able to accept the responsibility of being in this government, because of its sectarian domination and narrow-mindedness".

In recent weeks, Allawi, with US support, has assembled an alliance of more than 80 seats in the 275-seat National Assembly, including the Sunni-based Tawafuq bloc, as well as independents and smaller parties. His prospects of challenging Maliki were boosted by the decision of the Shiite Fadhila party to walk out of the UIA coalition last week. Fadhila, which has 15 MPs, has criticised the UIA's "sectarianism" and is being actively courted by Allawi, but has yet to join his grouping.

Allawi is also wooing the Kurdish nationalist parties, which have 55 seats. He travelled to the Kurdish north last week to meet with Massoud Barzani, who is head of the Kurdish regional government. As Barzani's spokesman Abdul-Khaleq Zanganah told Associated Press, the two held talks on forming "a national front to take over from the political bloc now supporting al-Maliki". The presence of the US ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, at the discussions was an obvious sign of US backing for the enterprise, as well as a warning to Maliki.

Just as significant is the fact that the two men flew to Riyadh this week for discussions with the Saudi monarchy, which, with Washington's encouragement, has taken a more aggressive role in regional politics since the end of last year, with the aim of undermining Iranian influence. Sections of the Saudi elite are openly hostile to the Maliki government, regarding it as little more than a stooge for their regional rival Iran. Allawi needs no convincing to get rid of Maliki, but Kurdish leaders may well need inducements and guarantees.

The main objective of the two major Kurdish parties—Barzani's Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—has been to secure an autonomous Kurdish regional government and to extend it to include the oil-rich northern area around Kirkuk. Allawi and his bloc, however, are calling for constitutional changes that would weaken or even abolish regional groupings of provinces. At the same time, Barzani may consider an alliance with Allawi as necessary to ensure continued US backing.

Much of the commentary about Allawi's obvious manoeuvring is preoccupied with speculation about possible political combinations that would give him a parliamentary majority. For instance, if Allawi fails to gain the support of the Kurdish parties, the UIA will continue to control the National Assembly, provided its 113-seat bloc remains intact. Such calculations ignore the fact that neither the Bush administration nor Allawi would have the slightest hesitation in ignoring the Iraqi constitution, dispensing with its extremely limited "democratic" norms and using other means to seize power.

The *World Socialist Web Site* reported a series of articles in the US press last year, beginning in August, openly hinting that the Bush administration was considering dispensing with the Maliki government and "democracy" in Iraq. It is significant that the reemergence of Allawi into the political limelight coincides with an article in the *Los Angeles Times* on March 12 revealing that the Pentagon has already begun planning for a fallback strategy if the current "surge" of US troops in Baghdad should fail to suppress the anti-US insurgency and expanding sectarian civil war.

According to the newspaper, the "El Salvador" option is currently under consideration, which includes a gradual withdrawal of US forces and a renewed emphasis on training Iraqi fighters. "El Salvador veterans and experts have been pushing for the model of a smaller, less visible US advisory presence," the article reported. "Some academics," it noted in passing, "have argued the US military turned a blind eye to government-backed death squads or even aided them." In fact, the US-backed death squads and savage military repression were the strategy used to eliminate leftist opponents of the regime in El Salvador and terrorise the entire population. At the height of the bloodletting in the early 1980s, over 13,000 people were being slaughtered a year.

Stephen Biddle of the Council on Foreign Relations argued in the *Los Angeles Times* that the El Salvador option would not work in Iraq because of the country's raging sectarian civil war. Any attempt to build a plan around training the Shiite-dominated government forces, he said, was bound to fail. The obvious solution is to get rid of the Maliki government and install a strongman who is prepared to do whatever it takes to stamp his authority on the security forces and unleash death squads to eliminate opposition to the US occupation.

Allawi certainly fits the bill. During his long exile from Iraq before 2003, he maintained close connections with dissident elements of the Baathist security and intelligence apparatus and has been accused of masterminding several terrorist acts against Hussein's regime. After

his installation as prime minister in 2004, he reappointed former Baathist officials to key posts to exploit their expertise in suppressing political opposition. During Allawi's term of office, notorious death squads such as the Wolf Brigade were established with the assistance of US advisers such as James Steele, a veteran of the El Salvador campaign.

Allawi is not averse to getting his hands dirty. In July 2004, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that two Iraqi eyewitnesses saw Allawi shoot dead six handcuffed and blindfolded prisoners at the Al-Amariyah security centre in Baghdad the previous month. The cold-blooded executions, carried out in front of US special forces troops, were meant as a lesson to Iraqi police and troops that they could also kill with impunity. No adequate investigation has been carried out into this brutal incident.

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