

# US seeks Shiite collaboration in attack on Moqtada al-Sadr

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Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, the leader of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and the main Shiite political rival of the anti-occupation cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, is in the US today for personal discussions with George Bush. Coming just days after the meeting between Bush and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, Hakim's visit is another sign of preparations for an armed confrontation with the Sadrist Mahdi Army militia in its Baghdad stronghold and an attempt by the US to refashion its puppet regime in Iraq.

Bush's central demand last week was that Maliki turn on the Sadrists—his principal ally within the Shiite coalition that dominates the Iraqi parliament. While there are tactical divisions in US ruling circles over Iraq policy, there is agreement among both Republicans and Democrats that Sadr and his movement have to be destroyed. Sadr's continuing insistence on a timetable for the withdrawal of all American troops and on Iraq's right to determine how its oil resources are exploited, combined with its maintenance of a militia believed to number between 40,000 and 60,000 men, is viewed as a significant and growing threat to the US strategic plan of indefinite domination over Iraq. Thousands of additional American troops are currently being deployed to Baghdad to prepare for an operation against the Mahdi Army.

Aides to the Iraqi prime minister told Associated Press that Maliki once again balked at the US demands. He warned Bush that the Sadr's supporters would resist the entry of the US military into Sadr City and were bitterly opposed to disbanding their militia when Sunni Arab extremists were carrying out repeated atrocities against Shiite civilians. The fact Maliki met with Bush has outraged millions of Sadrist loyalists and forced al-Sadr—dubbed by *Newsweek* magazine as the

“most dangerous man in Iraq”—to order his 30 loyalists in the parliament, including five cabinet ministers, to boycott the government until a US withdrawal timetable is announced.

It is under these conditions that Abdul Aziz al-Hakim has flown to Washington. Direct US talks with Hakim were among the recommendations made to Bush's cabinet in the November 8 memo authored by his national security advisor Stephen Hadley.

The memo proposed that the US ratchet up the pressure on Maliki to break his political alliance with Moqtada al-Sadr and sanction the destruction of the Mahdi Army militia. It warned, however, that “pushing Maliki to take these steps without augmenting his capabilities could force him to failure” as it would immediately pose the prospect of rebellions by Sadrist supporters in the Iraqi police and army and “major Shia disturbances in southern Iraq”. The US, Hadley declared, would need to help Maliki “form a new political base among moderate politicians from Sunni, Shia, Kurdish and other communities”.

In plain English, Hadley proposed a complete refashioning of the puppet regime. A confrontation with the Sadrists is looming and threatening a collapse of the current Shiite-dominated Iraqi government. A new regime—headed by Maliki if he goes along with a bloody escalation of violence, or someone else if he does not—will need to be put together from whatever factions within the parliament are prepared to go along with the US agenda. For that reason, the leader of the “moderate” Sunni party in the parliament, Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi, has been invited for talks in Washington in January.

As the “moderate” Shiite faction, the Bush administration is looking to SCIRI to line up against the Sadrists. Since 2003, SCIRI has been among the most

venal supporters of the US invasion, in order to secure power and privilege for the Shiite clerical and propertied elite it represents.

SCIRI has a proven record of collaborating with the US occupation against the Sadrists, who are its chief rival for influence among the Shiite population. In April 2004, when Moqtada al-Sadr issued a call to arms against the occupation, SCIRI opposed the uprising and used its influence to isolate the militant layers who fought the US military. SCIRI ministers took part in the cabinet of interim prime minister Iyad Allawi, which sanctioned the brutal American assaults on Karbala and Najaf during which hundreds of Shiite fighters were slaughtered.

Hakim—the son of Muhsin al-Tabataba'i al-Hakim, the highest ranking Shiite cleric until his death in 1970—was also central in ensuring that current head cleric in Iraq, Ali al-Sistani, refused to give any support or sympathy toward the Sadrist rebellion. His influence among the established Shiite clergy is far greater than that of Sadr, who has no theological credentials and is viewed as an upstart and a potential threat by many clerics. While the Sadrists have established a dominant position in Baghdad's working class Shiite suburbs such as Sadr City, most of southern Iraq remains under the control of SCIRI or Maliki's Da'awa Party.

SCIRI's own militia, the Iranian-trained Badr Brigade, effectively dissolved itself into the US-created army and police during the first year of the occupation. SCIRI-controlled units, along with ones made up largely of Kurdish *peshmerga* militia, have been among the few that have been of any serious assistance to the American military. The interior ministry police commandos, in particular, are alleged to be full of Badr militiamen and are blamed for the death squad operations against sympathisers of the Sunni-based insurgency. In the event of an operation to "disarm" the Mahdi Army, the US military will no doubt seek to use them against Sadr's militia.

Maliki's aides told Associated Press that Hakim would give assurances to Bush today that he would not allow the Iranian regime to "use him to promote its own interests" in Iraq. At the same time he would offer himself as a conduit for talks with Tehran over Iraq. SCIRI's main role would be to insist that Iran do as it did in 2004 and not provide any direct or indirect assistance to the Sadrists in the midst of a US

crackdown.

What SCIRI and others who go along with the US agenda will gain was broadly hinted at in the memo on Iraq options rushed off by outgoing Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld on November 6. Rumsfeld proposed that the US "provide money to key political and religious leaders (as Saddam Hussein did) to get them to help us get through this difficult period".

The sordid diplomacy in Washington underscores the mafia-like character of the Bush administration and cynical nature of its claims that the US invasion has produced "democracy" in Iraq. There is barely even the pretence that Iraq's parliament makes decisions about the country's future. Figures like Maliki are viewed as puppets to be bullied into compliance as the American ruling elite desperately seeks to overcome the debacle in Iraq and shore up US interests.



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