

A prelude to confrontation with Iran: the US arms Sunni militia in Iraq

James Cogan
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One of the factors that American military planners have been compelled to take into account as the Bush administration prepares for war with the Shiite regime in Iran is that they will face opposition from the Shiite population inside Iraq, as well as the Shiite parties that dominate the pro-occupation government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

On top of political protests from Baghdad, demonstrations and civil unrest, an assault on Iran could trigger widespread attacks on US forces in Iraq not only by Shiite militias such as Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army, but also by Shiite units of the Iraqi army and police that have political and religious sympathies with Tehran. As an adjunct to this year's troop "surge", the Pentagon has been making preparations for this eventuality.

According to figures cited by McClatchy Newspapers on November 28, the US military in Iraq has recruited 192 Sunni tribal councils and "local citizens groups" to put more than 77,500 Sunni militiamen onto the streets of a number of Iraqi cities and towns, including areas of Baghdad. The fighters, many of whom were previously part of anti-occupation guerilla cells, receive a salary of some \$US300 per month. American officials told McClatchy Newspapers last month that they intend to enlist at least 100,000.

Those who have embraced the US occupation form a wealthy stratum of Sunni tribal leaders, former state officials and army officers who were loyal to Saddam Hussein's Baath Party. They are hostile to Iran, the Shiite parties and the Sunni fundamentalist movements such as Al Qaeda in Iraq that emerged after the US invasion and challenged the Baathists' authority over the Sunni population. They represent a sizeable layer of the Sunni elite who have concluded that their best prospects for restoring their power and privileges is to

collaborate with the very foreign force that overthrew them.

The Sunni militia forces have been assembled completely outside the authority or control of the Iraqi government and the new Iraqi military. Given that the US government pays them, they are quite literally American mercenaries.

In some respects, both the US and the Sunni elite have returned to the policy that prevailed after the 1979 Iranian revolution placed the Shiite clergy in political power in Tehran. Fearful that the revolution would trigger political convulsions in Iraq and throughout the region, the Baathist regime invaded Iran in 1980. In doing so, Saddam Hussein had the backing not only of conservative Arab states, but increasingly of Washington, which provided direct military and financial assistance.

US general Rick Lynch candidly told the *New York Times* earlier this year that the US military's new Sunni allies had told him: "We hate you because you are occupiers, but we hate Al Qaeda worse, and we hate the Persians [a catch-all term for Iran and Shiite parties in Iraq] even more."

The US recruitment of Sunni militias has been conducted despite bitter opposition from Maliki and his cabinet—again highlighting the absurdity the Bush administration's claims that occupied Iraq is a "sovereign" state.

Publicly, Shiite opponents have chosen to warn of the danger of a civil war in the event of a US pull-out from Iraq. Sami al-Askari, for example, a politician close to Maliki, told McClatchy that "when the US leaves, what we'll have are two armies. One that is loyal to the government, and one that is not loyal."

However, the American ruling class, whether served by a Republican or Democratic administration after

January 2009, has made clear it has no intention of withdrawing from Iraq and abandoning its grip over some of the world's largest oil reserves. Al-Askari's comments also conceal the fact that the US invasion fomented the civil war already underway between the rival Shiite and Sunni factions of the Iraqi elite.

The Shiite parties are well aware of this. In the initial stages of the occupation, they and Kurdish nationalist parties were the beneficiaries of a US policy that marginalised the former Baathist ruling stratum. While not saying so openly, the Maliki government is fearful that under conditions of a build-up toward war with Iran, a clear shift is being made back toward the Sunni elite.

Thus far, the Sunni turn from resistance to collaboration has primarily assisted the occupation to achieve a measure of stability in several predominantly Sunni-populated provinces of western and central Iraq and Sunni suburbs of Baghdad. Many of the Sunni militiamen, instead of organising attacks on US troops, have been providing crucial assistance to American forces in destroying Islamic fundamentalist guerilla cells.

Only one US soldier was killed last month in Anbar province, for example, compared with 30 in November 2006. Overall, US casualties for the past two months are among the lowest in three years.

At the same time, amid US preparations for a military strike on Iran, there have been many indications over the past year that the Bush administration wants to replace the Maliki government with one in which the Sunni Baathist establishment plays a greater or even dominant role. The US, however, has been unable to push through its plans for a "national unity" government through the Iraqi parliament, which is deeply divided on sectarian and ethnic lines.

No significant Shiite grouping has been prepared to align with the Sunni parties that have a presence in the parliament. The Kurdish nationalist parties, which would have to play a role in any move against Maliki, have maintained their alliance with the Shiite parties. They view the present government as the best means of achieving their objective of incorporating the city of Kirkuk, and the rich oilfields surrounding it, into the territory of the autonomous Kurdish region that exists in northern Iraq—a perspective opposed by the Sunni factions.

Without the figleaf of parliament, more direct methods would have to be used to rearrange the puppet government in Baghdad. Whatever the exact course of events in Iraq as US tensions with Iran heighten, the collaboration of the Sunni establishment with the US occupation, as well as the tens of thousands of Sunni fighters on the US payroll, provides Washington with a useful counterweight in dealing with the Maliki government and the Shiite parties.



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