

Iraq's "National Security Council": a move toward open dictatorship

By James Cogan
24 March 2006

The announcement on March 19 that steps are being taken to form an extra-parliamentary "National Security Council" (NSC) is a warning that the Bush administration is moving toward an openly dictatorial regime in Iraq.

The White House's attempts to portray Iraq as a country in a transition to "democracy" are becoming increasingly threadbare. More than three months after the December 2005 elections, there is no new government and no indications that one will be formed anytime soon. No party or alliance holds a majority of seats, let alone the two-thirds majority constitutionally required to elect the presidential council that names the prime minister.

The longer the intractable stalemate continues, the more the struggle for dominance in post-invasion Iraq is being fought out on the streets. A low-level civil war is raging between rival Sunni and Shiite militias in Baghdad and the surrounding regions. Since the destruction of the Shiite al-Askariya mosque in Samarra on February 22, bombings, mortar strikes, ethnic cleansing and targeted death squad killings have claimed hundreds of lives on both sides of the sectarian divide. At the same time, attacks on American troops by predominantly Sunni guerillas are continuing unabated.

The NSC is the Bush administration's solution. The brainchild of Zalmay Khalilzad, the US ambassador in Iraq, and Massoud Barzani, the Kurdish nationalist leader who heads the autonomous Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq, the intention is that the 19-member council will take control over the Iraqi state, regardless of what happens in the bitterly divided parliament.

The NSC is particularly intended to undermine the position of the Shiite United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), which holds 130 of the parliament's 275 seats and dominates the "transitional" government that was formed in May 2005. The UIA is comprised of the Da'awa movement of the current prime minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari; the Iranian-linked Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI); and the fundamentalist movement headed by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. It has insisted on retaining the posts of prime minister and interior minister, as well as the main portfolios responsible for providing social services.

The UIA's demands have been rejected by the Kurdish

nationalist alliance, Sunni Arab-based parties and the coalition led by Iyad Allawi—the émigré collaborator with the US invasion who the Bush administration installed as the country's "interim prime minister" in 2004. Combined, the Kurd, Sunni and secular blocs have 133 seats, more than enough to block any attempt by the Shiite alliance to form a government.

The Kurdish nationalists are hostile to Jaafari and the Sadr faction, which opposes the Kurd's perspective of incorporating the oil-rich city of Kirkuk into the KRG. Sunni parties and Allawi accuse SCIRI of using its control over the interior ministry to infiltrate its supporters into the security forces and wage a reign of terror against Sunni supporters of the former Baathist regime and the Sunni population in general. The Kurds are insisting that the UIA nominate someone beside Jaafari, while Sunni leaders are demanding the UIA hand over the security ministries to so-called "non-sectarians", a phrase considered by Shiites to be little more than a euphemism for former generals in Saddam Hussein's Sunni-dominated armed forces.

Behind the opposition to the UIA is the Bush administration. Under conditions of rising tension between Washington and Tehran, the White House considers the Shiite parties too close to the Iranian regime to control the Iraqi security forces. The Pentagon also calculates that incorporating elements of the ex-Baathist establishment into the Iraqi government will convince elements of the resistance to end their guerilla war against the occupation.

The announcement of the NSC is clearly a compromise by the UIA after weeks of unrelenting US pressure that they agree to form a "national unity government" with the other factions. According to unnamed American officials, the council will function as a "parallel" authority to the caretaker government headed by Jaafari, while negotiations continue in the parliament. It will formulate policy for the army and police, the budget and the distribution of oil revenues. It will reportedly develop strategies to disarm the Shiite militias and end the anti-occupation resistance that is raging in the largely Sunni Arab provinces of western and central Iraq.

Despite there being no basis in the Iraqi constitution for any body apart from the government exercising such sweeping powers, NSC decisions will only be referred to the parliament

if they require legislation.

The security council will consist of nine members of the Shiite alliance, four from the Kurdish parties, four from Sunni parties and two “secular” politicians. The only concession to the UIA is that a two-thirds vote will be required to make any decision, giving a veto to the Shiite parties. The concentration of power in the hands of such a small group, however, will make it much easier for Khalilzad and other American officials to manipulate.

While the US is calling for ongoing operations against the Sunni resistance, there are hints that it is considering another bloody crackdown against the more extreme Shiite militias, such as elements of the Sadrist movement. General Rick Lynch threatened last month that the US military would “not allow” the Sadrists to take control of any area of Iraq. By all reports, Sadr’s Mahdi Army openly controls most of the Shiite suburbs of Baghdad.

The composition of the NSC underscores that its purpose is to reduce the power of the Shiite fundamentalist alliance and deliver it to more trusted collaborators of the US. The 19 members will reportedly include the president, vice presidents, prime minister and deputy prime ministers. As the new parliament has not elected any of these positions, they will be filled by the individuals who hold them in the caretaker “transitional” government.

Thus, Ahmad Chalabi, the longtime CIA asset whose party did not win a single seat in the recent elections, will sit on the council, as he is one of the three deputy prime ministers in the transitional administration. The other deputy prime ministers are Abed Mutlak al-Jiburi, a former general under Saddam Hussein, and Rowsch Shaways, a Kurdish nationalist. The pro-American Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani is currently president. While a SCIRI official is one vice president, the other is the Sunni leader Ghazi al-Yawar who has worked with the US forces since the invasion.

Barzani will have a place as KRG president, while pro-US Sunni Adnan Pachachi, another émigré with little popular support, will sit on the council because he was named last week as the caretaker speaker of parliament.

Most significantly, Iyad Allawi will represent the “secular” bloc, which won only 25 seats in December. In 2004, Allawi, as interim prime minister, gave the green light for the brutal US operations against the short-lived Sadrist uprising in the Shiite cities of Karbala and Najaf and the assault on the Sunni city of Fallujah. Earlier, in June 2004, he was accused of personally executing six alleged Sunni insurgents in a Baghdad prison. While he is despised among ordinary Iraqis, he has relations with the ruling elite and military office caste that held sway under Hussein and is considered reliable in Washington due to his role in the first year of the occupation.

For this reason, he is being groomed by the White House to play the role of Iraq’s new strongman. Press reportage has consistently referred to Allawi as the most likely head of the

NSC. An unnamed “senior political source” told Reuters: “The job was created for him. We have been discussing it for at least two months.”

At a press conference on March 21, Bush declared he was “encouraged” by the “progress toward a council that gives each of the country’s main political factions a voice in making security and economic policies”. He hailed the formation of the NSC as “an indicator that Iraq’s leaders understand the importance of a government of national unity”.

In reality, the discussion in Washington, and among the Iraqi leaders closest to the White House, is that the security council provides a means to bypass the political impasse in the parliament altogether. In interview with Reuters on March 21, Allawi sought to use the danger of civil war to justify the NSC—and himself—assuming dictatorial executive powers immediately.

“Unfortunately, the talks [in parliament] are still about the concept of a national unity government. We are saying, let’s form a government [the security council] until things are more stable”, he declared. “Then we could change the government. But the tragedy of killing and terrorism must not go on.” The main task of the NSC, he said, was to take control of the security apparatus and “strengthen the army, police, security and intelligence services”.

Hinting at the discussion in occupation circles that the NSC may become a permanent fixture, Reuters reported: “Technically, the council would be a temporary body designed to help pull Iraq out of crisis, sources said, but it might be needed for a long time.” In other words, an unconstitutional and unelected cabal, worked out behind closed doors with American officials, is preparing to take open-ended control of the armed forces, the budget and the oil industry. This is Iraqi “democracy” three years after the US invasion.

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