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## Coup In Iraq?

**Robert Dreyfuss**

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**Is the Bush administration** considering a coup d'etat in Iraq before the end of the year, in a desperate effort to salvage its war? It's not outside the realm of possibility. Like JFK in 1963, who—faced with a notoriously corrupt Saigon regime and a growing Viet Cong insurgency in Vietnam—gave the green light to topple and assassinate President Ngo Dinh Diem in Vietnam, President Bush might give a wink and a nod to the CIA, the U.S. military, and Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad to get rid of Iraq's current regime. The Diem coup didn't go well. Considering how unlikely it is that Bush has even heard of Diem, I doubt he's learned that lesson.

More and more, it's beginning to look like the end for Iraq's Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. When he took office in the spring, Maliki was touted by the Bush administration as Iraq's savior. In fact, behind the scenes, the Midland Machiavellis in the White House and their proconsul in Iraq, Ambassador Khalilzad, wheedled and maneuvered Iraq's corrupt political class into giving Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari the heave-ho and installing Maliki in his place. Like the other too-clever-by-half stratagems of the Bush people in Iraq, the installation of Maliki created more problems than it solved, and it now looks like Maliki has utterly lost the confidence of the White House.

Question is, what are they going to replace him with—and when? According to recent reports, the United States appears to have given Maliki a deadline: two months.

Those considering an exit strategy for Iraq might see a deadline for Maliki as a good excuse to get out: "Okay, we got rid of Saddam, and now it's Iraq's mess. If Maliki and the Iraqis want a civil war, they can have one." But others, including Vice President Dick Cheney and the battered coterie of neocons, might see toppling Maliki as their one last chance to salvage the U.S. enterprise in Iraq.

John Warner, the realist-minded chairman of the Senate Armed Service Committee, may be among those thinking about an exit. Yesterday, he [told reporters](#) :

I assure you, in two or three months, if this thing hasn't come to fruition and if this level of violence is not under control and this government able to function, I think it's a responsibility of our government internally to determine: Is there a change of course that we should take? And I wouldn't take off the table any option at this time.

By "any option," I'm assuming Warner means withdrawal. Others, like Cheney, might see it differently.

Let's look at the story so far. In August 17, *The New York Times* [carried](#) an anonymous quote suggesting that the Bush administration had all but given up on democracy in Iraq, and was casting

about for “alternatives.” I highlighted the item in my blog, wondering what it meant, exactly. Here it is, in full, just two paragraphs near the end of a lengthy piece on U.S. Iraq policy:

Some outside experts who have recently visited the White House said Bush administration officials were beginning to plan for the possibility that Iraq's democratically elected government might not survive.

"Senior administration officials have acknowledged to me that they are considering alternatives other than democracy," said one military affairs expert who received an Iraq briefing at the White House last month and agreed to speak only on condition of anonymity.

It's obvious why some White House officials might be having second thoughts about Maliki. He's politically paralyzed, tethered to the support of Muqtada al-Sadr, whose 30 representatives in the Iraqi assembly gave Maliki the margin he needed to become prime minister. He faithfully parrots the Bush administration's line that Iraq is the central front in the so-called war on terrorism, but at home he's praised Hezbollah in Lebanon, made goo-goo eyes at Iran and said bad things about Israel. And despite repeated urging, at times bordering on outright threats, he hasn't moved to crack down on Shiite militias and death squads. And how can he? He depends on those very forces for his political life.

During September, the anti-Maliki chorus grew—from the White House to the U.S. military in Iraq to former Congressman Lee Hamilton, who co-chairs the Iraq Study Group with James Baker, the Bush family fixer. (You can read my take on the Iraq Study Group [here](#) and [here](#).) Hamilton minced no words in [warning Maliki](#) that he has only a very limited time:

Time is short, the level of violence is great. The margins for error are narrow. The government of Iraq needs to show its own citizens soon and the citizens of the United States that it is deserving of continued support.

On September 20, in a piece entitled “Doubts Increasing About the Strength of Iraq Premier,” the *Times* said that President Bush's top advisers have a “far more pessimistic view” of Maliki than what they say in public. Maliki's inability to get control of Iraq “drives Bush crazy,” said one official to the *Times*. “He doesn't take well to anyone who talks about getting something done and then refuses to take the first step.”

Bush himself, while repeating his mantra about staying the course, hinted too that U.S. support for Iraq's government might be conditional on Maliki making real progress. In one instance, Bush declared in blunt terms that Maliki had better take action, and soon. “America's a patient nation, and Iraq can count on our partnership as long as the new government continues to make the hard decisions necessary to advance a unified, democratic and peaceful Iraq,” said Bush.

From that statement alone, it seems pretty clear that Maliki, whose tenure is supposed to be four years, ain't gonna last that long. To make sure he got the message, U.S. military officials and even Khalilzad are making the same point. Khalilzad put it this way on Sunday: “In the course of the next two months [Maliki] has to make progress in terms of containing sectarian violence.”

A few days earlier, on September 28, the Washington Post carried an article headlined, not so subtly, “American Commanders Question Political Will Of Iraqi Prime Minister.” In it, U.S. military officers, speaking anonymously, were quoted as follows:

“We are now at a time when we have a little bit of influence there,” said the senior U.S. military official. “There is going to come a time when I would argue we are going to have to force this issue. . . . We have to, wherever we can, use what pressure, what influence we have, to get them as quickly as possible to clear these places out the time is short for them to deal

with that over time because this can't go on like that."

"I don't see an open end to this deal, I mean, where this just goes on and on. I think the government, the people will get tired if they don't see any action on this."

Time is short? Force the issue? Get tired of this? There's only one way to read all this, namely that the Bush administration has given Maliki 60 days to fix Iraq, or else.

So what does this mean? As I see it, there are several options that desperate Bush administration officials might seize on, if they do indeed want to replace Maliki.

First, under the constitution, Maliki could resign, triggering another scramble for a prime minister. But that would open Iraq to a period of even greater instability and uncertainty. It would also entice countless power-seekers to attempt power plays, and in that case the paramilitary forces associated with each of them would come into play. All in all, not exactly a plan for "victory."

Second, perhaps under a constitutional fig leaf, Iraq's political leaders—that is, the U.S.-installed ones, not including the resistance—could agree to establish some sort of emergency "government of national salvation."

Back in the spring, when it seemed like the factions would not be able to agree on the selection of a prime minister, there were rumors that some emergency government might be created, to rule by decree. But it's hard to see how any such coalition would have the muscle to discipline Shiite death squads and militias and deal with the burgeoning Sunni resistance movement, because it would still be a coalition of coalitions, and it would fall apart at the first disagreement.

Third, entirely outside the constitution, there is the possibility of a military coup d'état. Rumors of a coup have swirled in Baghdad for at least a year. Over the weekend, when Maliki announced a sudden, and unprecedented, curfew banning vehicular and pedestrian traffic in the entire capital, there were reports that an army coup d'état had been thwarted.

One Iraq expert I talked to told me that perhaps some of the Iraqi army units being moved into Baghdad as part of the current crackdown might be candidates to seize power in the Green Zone. Of course, such an action would have to be encouraged and sponsored by the U.S. command in Iraq and the CIA, which—according to Iraqi sources—has a firm hand on Iraq's own intelligence service.

But a military coup would be a very brutal and bloody affair, instantly pitting the more Sunni-friendly army against the Shiite establishment and its paramilitary forces. On the other hand, Iraq's military, unlike the police and Interior Ministry forces, has earned the grudging respect of many Iraqis, who see it as more neutral and even nationalist force.

Fourth, there is an option somewhere in between the second and third options I've just outlined, namely, the imposition of a strongman—perhaps someone like former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi—by the military, but with the military acting behind the scenes. It would depend on getting at least passive support from Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who has despaired of Iraqi politics of late and withdrawn. This option would have an exceedingly high degree of difficulty, however, and this week Allawi, in London, denied rumors that he is involved in plotting a coup d'état.

But options like these are being actively bruited about inside and outside the Bush administration. All of them are high-risk strategies—and because U.S. involvement in such schemes would likely be revealed in short order, it would mean that any Iraqi government created in such circumstances would suffer enormously from being seen as a U.S. puppet.

In addition, it's utterly unfair to blame Maliki for Iraq's mess. He—and his right-wing religious

party, Al Dawa—may be part of the problem in Iraq, but only part. The mess in Iraq that President Bush is demanding be cleaned up was created by Bush, his neocons and Vice President Cheney. By now, Iraq is so far down the path of chaos and civil war that no amount of fist-pounding and threats to Maliki makes any difference.

Still, how else to read the drumbeat of you've-got-two-months warnings? Desperate men do desperate things. If the Bush administration is truly unwilling to consider getting out of Iraq, then what are its options? I don't expect a coup d'état in Baghdad this month. But after the U.S. elections—say, in two months? Anything goes.

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