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And the winner is ... Muqtada

By Pepe Escobar
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Iraqi Premier Nuri al-Maliki hit Tehran this Monday. He was duly received by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and talked extensively to President Mahmud Ahmadinejad, still beaming after his rock-star tour of Lebanon last week.

Maliki visited the holy city of Qom, described Iran-Iraq relations as "strategic" and called for even deeper Iran-Iraq cooperation. A good time was had by all - but certainly not the Armageddon-warning brigade in Washington.

Now let's shine some light over the broader context. Take this antiwar.com headline; "White House demands Maliki oust [Shi'ite cleric Muqtada al-]Sadr from coalition." Anyone repressing uncontrollable rolls of laughter wins a sheesh kebab.

All through these interminable seven months since the Iraq elections on March 7, the Barack Obama administration said it would "not interfere" in internal Iraqi politics. Even the ghosts of the whores of Babylon knew Washington wanted its own favored, slightly pro-Western "coalition" in power - a Maliki-Iyad Allawi "cohabitation", as the French put it, with that Arab version of Tony Soprano, former Central Intelligence Agency asset and former "butcher of Fallujah" Allawi as prime minister.

Now it turns out Washington is involved in - guess what? - a whole lot of interfering. Maliki is set to actually remain in power - thanks to support by the Sadrist bloc. Allawi's Iraqiya List had slightly more seats (91) than Maliki's list (89), but not enough to form a

government. At the same time, the Sadrists became predominant over the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council and the Iraqi National Alliance (10% of the 325 contested seats). Even said ghosts of the whores of Babylon also knew that after the elections the real kingmaker in Iraq would continue to be Muqtada.

Checkmate

Oh, those were the days when "firebrand" Muqtada was the Pentagon's top bogeyman - even bigger than Osama bin Laden, routinely described as "the most dangerous man in Iraq". It was so much easier to try to take him out than to deal with his nationalist appeal.

Today, only armchair "strategists" in Washington can actually believe that Maliki will tremble in his brogues and show Muqtada the door; for in that case Maliki would literally kiss his majority coalition goodbye.

As much as the Obama administration wanted a Maliki-Allawi cohabitation, Tehran wanted a Maliki-Muqtada cohabitation. Guess who's the winner - again; not only the regime in Tehran, but also the Shi'ite clerics in Iraq. With an important point to be considered; just because Muqtada himself is studying in Qom to become an ayatollah, that does not mean that Baghdad will be ruled from Tehran.

Western media have often spun that Iran masterminded a sort of coup d'etat in Baghdad. It's much more subtle than that.

Tehran abundantly knew the many reasons why Muqtada would not ally the Sadrists with Maliki. So they set in motion a very skillful diplomatic chess game operating first via religious channels.

Ayatollah Kazem al-Haeri, Muqtada's spiritual adviser, asked him to give Maliki a try. Then last month, Maliki sent his chief of staff to Qom along with Abdul Halim al-Zuhairi from his Da'wa party to talk in person to Muqtada.

Hezbollah's Mohamed Kawtharani came from Beirut, and they were all joined by General Qassem Suleimani, the commander of the al-Quds Brigades of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps.

Then Ahmadinejad met Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus on his way to the United Nations in New York - Ahmadinejad did a tour de force to convince Assad that Maliki was OK.

To top it all, Supreme Leader Khamenei - not to mention eminent Qom elders - and Hezbollah's secretary general Hassan Nasrallah gave their final imprimatur to the Muqtada-Maliki cohabitation.

No wonder an outmaneuvered Washington is now on overdrive warning once again of a "Shi'ite crescent" - that figment of the imagination of those wildly democratic heavens such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Kuwait. As for the Allawi camp, its spin mantra - very

popular in US corporate media - is that Iran is taking over Iraq. In a late September interview to German weekly Der Spiegel, Allawi insisted fear prevailed everywhere and war could soon break out all across the Middle East.

Obama may have declared the end of the Iraqi war to all those gullible enough to swallow it - but the fact remains that thousands of US troops will continue to be in Iraq even after the December 2011 withdrawal deadline, which in itself will be fought one Bradley vehicle at a time by the Pentagon. No one will know for quite a while what sort of military agreement will be struck by the - still - US occupiers and a theoretically sovereign Iraqi government. Needless to say that the Pentagon - religiously following the "full-spectrum dominance" doctrine - will pull out all stops to keep at least a handful of military bases inside Iraq.

These latest developments anyway seem to be producing three inalterable facts.

Number one. Baghdad will have a Tehran-friendly and Shi'ite-friendly government, with intertwined strategic interests. But that does not mean it will be ruled by Tehran. Sunnis will have to be included; otherwise civil war will be back (not that it ever left; what General David "counter-insurgency or bust" Petraeus managed to do was to sell to a gullible US public opinion a "surge" as a fake victory).

Number two. All that oil. Iraq's proven oil reserves now stand at 143.1 billion barrels, up from 115 billion barrels. That makes them the third-largest in the world, above Iran, according to the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Oil exports account for 95% of Baghdad's revenue. And most of the new oil will be exploited by Chinese, Russian and Asian companies, not US Big Oil. So much for the neo-conservative dream of a US-controlled Iraq as "the new OPEC".

Number three. The final nail in the coffin of the neo-conservative fantasy of a Greater Middle East as an American lake. And to believe that these people still have a shot at being back at the helm of the US government by November 2012. Uncle Marx, we miss you so much; history does prefer to repeat itself as farce.