

US administration plans for long-term military occupation in Iraq

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Despite public claims to the contrary, the Bush administration is preparing for a permanent military presence in Iraq as part of broader plans to strengthen US strategic and economic interests in the Middle East, Central Asia and beyond.

Citing senior US officials, the *New York Times* revealed on Sunday that the Pentagon is planning to maintain at least four bases in key locations in Iraq into the indefinite future. These include: the international airport just outside Baghdad; Tallil air field near Nasiriya in the south, an isolated airstrip known as H-1 in the western desert; and the Bashur air base in the northern Kurdish areas.

While paying lipservice to the need for an agreement with any new administration in Baghdad, the military is already in control of the four facilities and plans to stay. Colonel John Dobbins, commander of the Tallil Forward Air Base, told the newspaper that the US Air Force plan envisioned “probably two bases that will stay in Iraq for an amount of time.” The army holds the international airport and US Special Forces have shifted from secret bases in Jordan and Saudi Arabia to set up headquarters at H-1.

Washington clearly expects that any Iraqi regime installed in Baghdad will ratify the arrangement. As a senior Bush administration official explained: “There will be some kind of a long-term defence relationship with a new Iraq, similar to Afghanistan. The scope of that has yet to be defined—whether it will be full-up operational bases, small forward operating bases or just plain access.”

The comparison with Afghanistan is a telling one. Nearly 18 months after the fall of the Taliban, the US has no plans to withdraw its troops from the country. Having installed a compliant regime in Kabul, the US military has established two major headquarters—one at the Bagram air base north of the capital and a second in the southern city of Kandahar—as well as a series of smaller forward bases. American forces have free rein to operate throughout the country, ostensibly in the hunt for “Al Qaeda and Taliban remnants”.

Ahmad Chalabi, the Iraqi exile favoured by the Pentagon to play a major political role in Baghdad, has already

signalled his support for an American military presence. He said that it was “a necessity until at least the first democratic election is held,” which he estimated as two years away. “[I]t is my view that a strategic alliance between Iraq and the United States is a very good thing for both,” he said last weekend.

Speaking at a press conference yesterday, US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld dismissed the *New York Times* report, declaring that any impression that the US plans “some sort of a permanent presence” was “inaccurate and unfortunate because we don’t plan to function as an occupier”. In response to a question, however, he refused to rule out the possibility of US bases in Iraq.

Moreover, Rumsfeld’s comments fly in the face of open public discussion of a long-term US military presence in Iraq. At the regular weekly “Black Coffee Briefing on the War on Iraq” of the rightwing American Enterprise Institute last Tuesday, resident analyst Thomas Donnelly bluntly stated: “American forces will be in the region, in Iraq, a long, long time. Decades.” The conservative thinktank has close connections with the Bush administration, particularly with Pentagon officials such as Rumsfeld and Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz.

Senior Republican Richard Lugar, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, told NBC on Sunday “at least we ought to be thinking of a period of five years”, adding “that may understate it”. Lugar raised concerns about the political instability created by the failure of the Bush administration to rapidly set up a post-war administration. “A gap has occurred and that had brought some considerable suffering. Among those rushing in to fill the void are clerics and religious groups,” he said.

What Lugar is obliquely referring to is the emergence of substantial anti-American protests in Baghdad, Nasiraya and other Iraqi cities over the last week, dominated, at present, by clerics demanding the withdrawal of US troops and the establishment of an Islamic state. In the Shiite suburbs of Baghdad and some southern cities, Shiite groups have rapidly moved to set up local administrations. Lugar is

simply stating the obvious: Washington cannot hope to sustain a pro-US regime in Baghdad without the backing of American firepower.

Retired US general Jay Garner, who will act as Washington's proconsul in Iraq, arrived in Baghdad yesterday and gave a pep talk at one of the city's hospitals ravaged by US bombing. "It begins with us working together, he told the staff, "but it is hard work and it takes a long time." Revealing the depth of bitterness among ordinary Iraqis, a female doctor, Iman, retorted: "If they give us anything it is not from their own pockets. It is from our oil. Saddam Hussein was an unjust ruler, but maybe one day we could have got rid of him and not had these foreigners come into our country."

A permanent US military presence in Iraq is not, however, just to ensure that the country and its oil reserves remain firmly under American control. The Bush administration views Iraq as a key base of operations for its plans to exert US dominion throughout the Middle East through military threat and force.

The *New York Times* commented that close US-Iraq ties "could become one of the most striking developments in a strategic revolution now playing out across the Middle East and Southwest Asia, from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean. A military foothold in Iraq would be felt across the border in Syria, and, in combination with the continued United States presence in Afghanistan, it would virtually surround Iran with a new web of American influence."

Top White House officials have already issued a series of blunt warnings to Syria and also Iran on the basis of a string of unsubstantiated claims, in particular about their alleged "weapons of mass destruction" programs. As the *New York Times* noted, senior administration officials make no secret of the fact that an American military presence close to Iran and Syria is designed to "make them nervous".

The consolidation of major US military bases in Iraq would also allow Washington to reduce its "military footprint" in countries like Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Jordan where anti-American sentiment has been growing. The first steps have already been taken with the removal of nearly all of the 50 US military aircraft from the Incirlik air base in Turkey and the withdrawal of US Special Forces from Saudi Arabia and Jordan.

The Iraq war has also allowed the Pentagon to press ahead with plans to scale down its established military bases in Western Europe, particularly Germany, and open up a series of new installations in Eastern Europe. Barred from exploiting Turkey to open a northern front against Baghdad, the US military used a Rumanian air base near the Black Sea port of Constanta to airlift US troops. The Bulgarian airport at Burgas, also on the Black Sea, was used for refuelling US

military aircraft and Hungary opened up a military base for the US to provide military training to Iraqi exiles.

An article in the *Guardian* newspaper yesterday entitled "How American power girds the globe with a ring of steel" reported that the top US air force officer in Europe, General Gregory Martin, had visited Bulgaria and Rumania earlier this month "sizing up real estate options for the American move into the Balkans". Martin told the press: "All of those places now represent opportunities for us to create relationships that some day will allow us the access we need."

The Bush administration has exploited the September 11 terrorist attacks to launch its wars against Afghanistan and now Iraq as part of long-held plans to establish US global domination, particularly through its control of the oil rich areas of the Middle East and Central Asia. New military bases have been set up in countries where the governments are either heavily dependent on the US economically or directly installed by Washington.

As the *Guardian* pointed out: "The past two years have seen a rapid extension of American military deployments across thousands of miles stretching from the Balkans to the Chinese border and taking in the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent... Thirteen new bases in nine countries ringing Afghanistan were rapidly established as Russia's underbelly in Central Asia became an American theatre for the first time."

Marcus Corbin, an analyst with the US thinktank Centre for Defence Information, told the *Guardian*: "In every meaningful sense, the reach and spread of the US bases is growing very strongly, alarmingly from the point of view of the rest of the world." The transformation of Iraq into a US protectorate is a key element in this wider scheme, which is aimed in the final analysis at undermining the economic and strategic interests of its major rivals in Europe and Asia.



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