Japanese government withdraws its troops from Iraq

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The arrival of 220 Japanese troops in Kuwait last week marked the complete withdrawal of Japan's 600-man Ground Self-Defence Force (GSDF) from Iraq.

If one were to believe Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's announcement on June 20, the Japanese troops are on their way home because their "humanitarian mission" has been accomplished. "Japan's GSDF troops in the region have played a considerable role in providing humanitarian and reconstruction support. That is why we have decided to withdraw," Koizumi declared.

In reality, the deployment of Japanese troops in early 2004 had nothing to do with helping the Iraqi people. Their two missions in Iraq were to secure Japan's oil interests in the country by strengthening the US-Japan alliance; and to send ground troops to a combat zone for the first time since World War II, setting a precedent for more active Japanese military interventions in the future.

Koizumi made the decision to withdraw before he steps down as prime minister in September, mindful of the mass opposition of ordinary Japanese people to the troop deployment, and concerned to ensure a smooth leadership transition within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). An opinion poll by the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper revealed late last year that 69 percent of respondents were opposed to Japan's continued presence in Iraq.

The 600 Japanese troops were dispatched to the southern Iraqi city of Samawa, which the government depicted as a "non-combat" zone after Bush declared in May 2003 that major combat operations in Iraq had ended. However, with the violent insurgency inflicting increasing numbers of severe US casualties, British and Australian forces were sent to Samawa to protect the Japanese soldiers. In addition, Tokyo paid huge sums of money to the local Samawa elite to ensure the security of its troops. Once the British and Australian forces declared they would hand security over to Baghdad's puppet regime, the risk facing the Japanese troops increased, and Koizumi decided to act.

Last December, an article on the *Japan Focus* website, entitled "What Have Japan's Self-Defence Forces Accomplished in Iraq?" pointed out that the Japanese troops had done little for the stricken residents of Samawa, and that they faced growing hostility. At the beginning, there was false hope among local Iraqis that "Japanese companies like Sony and Toyota" would come, set up production and provide jobs and essential infrastructure. "However, one and a half years have passed since then and such 'hopes' and 'illusions' have faded away. Citizens began to feel that the SDF hadn't solved the problems of blackouts, water failures and unemployment," it noted.

The article quoted Muhammad Al-Galawi, a representative of Shiite leader Moqtada-al Sadr's office. "As Japan will never forget the [atomic] bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, we insist to the Japanese government that if the SDF continues their presence here, we cannot deny the possibility that we will attack the SDF. As long as they keep staying here, we regard them as occupation forces. Thus, the SDF is one of our targets. The friendship between the SDF and Samawa citizens will never be produced."

Al-Galawi went on to say: "It is not troops that Iraq needs, but citizens' power. We will welcome you if you take off your military uniforms and weapons. I would like you to think about the Iraqi side not just the SDF side."

Despite Koizumi's carefully presented image of the Iraqi mission as "pacifist", its underlying imperialist agenda of plundering the oil-rich country has been no different to that of the US, Britain or Australia. In fact, Japan has not ended its military involvement in Iraq. The Koizumi government has announced it will expand its 200-man Air Self-Defense unit based in Kuwait, which has been transporting US-led forces and supplies into Iraq. A further 10 personnel will be added to the existing unit and its operations expanded to include flights to Baghdad and the northern city of Arbil—something that Japan had previously refused to do because of the dangers posed to its forces.

The purpose of Tokyo's participation in the US-led occupation of Iraq has been to guarantee Japanese access to Middle Eastern oil and gas. Japan imports no less than 90 percent of its oil from the region. Not long after the GSDF deployment to southern Iraq was announced in late 2003, reports emerged about the involvement of Japanese companies in talks with senior officials of the Iraqi Oil Ministry to secure contracts over oil and gas fields. Among them was a Japanese consortium, headed by the Mitsubishi Corporation, which was seeking the rights to develop the one-billion-barrel Al Gharaf oilfield in southern Iraq.

Samawa, which is situated just 65 kilometres from Al Gharaf oilfield, was selected as the destination for the Japanese troops precisely for the purpose of looking after Japan's oil interests.

In 2003, Japan pledged $5 billion in low-interest loans to Iraq for the purposes of "reconstruction"—including a large portion earmarked for the oil sector. The Koizumi government also

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promised to train 1,000 Iraqi oil and gas engineers, starting in 2006.

Although Iraqi oil now accounts for just one percent of Japanese imports, Tokyo decided to join the US-led occupation of the country on the basis of more long-term considerations. As the world's second largest economic power, Japan is a resources-poor nation and regards energy as its most critical strategic issue.

In an interview with the *Japan Times* in January 2005, Sakai Keiko, a leading Japanese expert on Iraq and a member of the Japanese government-affiliated Institute of Developing Economies, bluntly pointed out that oil interests were the primary motivation behind Tokyo's deployment of troops to Iraq. She said the high quality Iraqi oil was particularly suitable for the Japanese refineries, especially the varieties of Kirkuk Light Crude and Basra Light Crude. At present Japan buys large amounts of United Arab Emirates oil, largely because of its similarity to Iraqi oil, but "ideally it wants the Iraqi variety".

In addition, Japan, like France, was one of Iraq's major trading partners and investors in infrastructure projects in the 1970s and 80s. However, because of the war, many payments to Japanese firms for construction projects remain unpaid. Keiko said the sending of Japanese ground troops was "to secure room for Japanese business—including construction projects. If Japan did nothing, all the projects would go to the US and British companies."

Keiko also warned of the underlying tensions between the US and Japan. "Still, the US won't allow Japan to get the upper hand in Iraq. It doesn't want Japan getting too warm and friendly with the governments of both countries [Iraq and Iran]. It's one thing if trade in Iraq is done under the control of US and British companies, but Japan won't get the best petroleum or construction projects."

Japan's ruling elite drew definite conclusions in the aftermath of the 1990-91 Gulf War. In that first Iraq war, Japan did not play a military role, due to constitutional and political constraints. Article 9 of the Japanese constitution, drawn up by the US after World War II, prohibits the use of military force, except in a strictly defensive role.

Not only was Japan made to pay $13 billion for the US-led war, it lost access to Iraqi oil and its influence in the Middle East was significantly weakened. As a result, Japanese governments from then on have conducted a consistent campaign to legitimise the use of the military abroad in pursuit of its geopolitical and economic interests.

Koizumi has participated in Bush's "coalition of the willing" to ensure at least a portion of future Iraqi oil goes to Japan, and to promote a more aggressive Japanese military role by enhancing its relations with the US. In northeast Asia, a stronger US-Japan alliance has allowed Tokyo to take a more assertive role, especially against China.

But the prospect of complete US control of Middle Eastern oil has the potential to undermine Japan's energy interests. Iran has warned Japan that the $2 billion deal signed between the two countries in 2004 to develop the Azadegan oilfield could be cancelled due to Tokyo's cooperation with Washington's threats of economic sanctions or any support for US military action against Tehran.

At the recent G8 summit, Koizumi tried to downplay Japan's vulnerability in relation to energy supplies. "As oil prices hit $75, some people say it's a crisis. But the pinch can turn to be a chance." In fact, Koizumi is well aware of the growing risk to Japan's energy security.

G8 Research Group director John Kirton warned that the Israeli military offensive in Lebanon, and the general rise in tension throughout the region, is once again forcing Japan to reconsider its heavy reliance on Middle Eastern crude oil. "In the long run, Japan will be able to overcome the impact of the latest crisis, with its experience of the previous oil crisis and its advanced technology. But the crisis is still a concern about the prospect for the Japanese economy, which is just getting out of deflation."

Tokyo is busily dispatching its oil companies to buy or invest oil and gas assets around the world, in order to establish alternative resources of energy. The most important project is a $15 billion oil pipeline from Russian Siberia to the Pacific coast. However, during the G8 summit, Russian President Vladimir Putin refused to give Koizumi a guarantee that the project would ultimately provide oil for Japan. China is competing to build the pipeline into its own northeastern territory.

It is worth recalling that the rise of Japanese militarism prior to World War II was intimately bound up with the devastation caused by the Great Depression in the 1930s, and Tokyo's concern about its US and British rivals cutting off energy supplies and mineral resources. After the US imposed an oil embargo in 1941, Japan felt compelled to attack Pearl Harbour. Today, economic crises and great power rivalries are again driving the Japanese ruling elite toward militarism.

The 600 Japanese soldiers may be pleased that they are finally going home. But their deployment in Iraq has set a precedent for many more young Japanese men and women to be sent overseas in the coming period, to engage in ever-more dangerous missions.

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