

US generals insist on no troop withdrawal from Iraq

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Showing ongoing defiance of the principle that the military stands apart from politics, the commander of US forces in Iraq, General David Petraeus, and his second-in-command, Lieutenant General Raymond Odierno, have repeated their insistence over the past week that no significant withdrawal of troops would be possible for at least two years.

Under conditions of mass opposition among the American people to the war, the military hierarchy is stepping forward as intransigent defenders of a neo-colonial occupation that has already cost the lives of more than 3,680 Americans and over 700,000 Iraqis.

Petraeus confirmed to ABC News on July 30 that he wanted to have a substantial American force in Iraq until mid-2009 in order to firmly place the country under American control. "It's in our campaign plan," he said. "We do think it will take that amount of time, as you discussed, to establish the conditions for it. The key is really how much force do you need? The campaign plan lays out the general concepts, the lines of operation... the actual plans and actual force requirements are something that flows from that, and that's what General Odierno and I are working on now."

Odierno echoed his superior the following day. He told the *Los Angeles Times*: "We think that based on the campaign plan that we need forces here for a few more years. We need to have forces here in a deliberate fashion in order to accomplish what our goals are."

Underpinning these statements is the fact that the "surge" of 30,000 additional US troops since February has permitted the military to apply ruthless counter-insurgency tactics against Iraqi resistance fighters, who have to date been falsely portrayed as "Al Qaeda terrorists". Petraeus has deployed forces deep inside the strongholds of Sunni guerillas and Shiite militias, particularly in Baghdad. Entire suburbs have been sealed off with walls and roadblocks, and the population placed under strict curfews and subjected to constant identity checks. Hundreds of insurgents have been killed in bloody operations in cities and towns surrounding the capital, and thousands more men dragged off to US and Iraqi government detention centres.

For all the killing and repression, however, the surge has had little impact on the determination of Iraqis to resist the occupation. For American troops, Petraeus's tactics of forward deployment have made them easier targets and considerably increased their chances of being killed or wounded. More Americans have died since February than during any other six-month period of the war. In July, 80 more lost their lives, nearly twice as many as July 2006. In the first eight days of August, US casualties already stood at 22.

The generals' political intervention is aimed at silencing criticism at home over the disastrous consequences of the war. Demands for withdrawal are branded, either directly or indirectly, by many in the

officer caste as a "betrayal" of the military and its sacrifices. Those who call for the dying to continue, by contrast, are hailed for "supporting the troops". Ruling out any withdrawal, Lieutenant General James Dubrik, another Iraq commander, told the Associated Press this month that the territory seized during the surge "had been fought and died for and there's no reason to give it back right now".

The Bush administration has directly encouraged this intervention. The White House has turned the relationship between elected civilian authorities and the armed forces on its head, and declared that serving commanders are the only real authority on military policy. A report that Petraeus is due to deliver on September 15 on the progress of the "surge" has been given a status akin to holy writ in pro-war circles. As one right-wing blog site crudely put it: "Unless your name is General David Petraeus, your opinion on the war is irrelevant."

Petraeus and Odierno have drawn succour from the complicity and cowardice of the Democrat-controlled Congress, which has guaranteed funding for Iraq and rejected any attempt to impeach and remove Bush from office over the criminal character of the 2003 invasion. No faction of the Democratic Party has any genuine opposition to the real war aims of the Bush administration: US dominance over the world's third largest oil reserves and the establishment of long-term US strategic bases in the Middle East. The antiwar sentiment of the American people finds no expression within the official political establishment, allowing the generals to treat public opinion with disdain.

Defence Secretary Robert Gates seized upon the latest outbursts of the generals to make clear that regardless of whether a Republican or Democrat replaces Bush in 2009, US imperialism will keep troops in Iraq for the indefinite future. Gates told CNN's Wolf Blitzer on Sunday: "We anticipate trying to work out an arrangement with the Iraqi government whereby there will be a residual presence of US forces at some fraction of the current level that would be a stabilising and supporting force in Iraq for some protracted period to come. I think that's generally the view of almost anybody who is looking at this, that some residual force for some period of time will be required beyond when we begin a drawdown."

In response to a question regarding Odierno's statements, Gates hailed the military successes of the surge and did not dispute troops would be needed at current levels until after the next presidential election.

The emphasis on "military success" by both the White House and the generals is largely an attempt to gloss over the fact that the surge has produced a potentially fatal political crisis for the Shiite-dominated US puppet government in Baghdad.

In January, Bush declared that the deployment of additional US

forces would create time for Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to bring about “national reconciliation” with his predominantly Sunni opponents, including layers of the anti-occupation resistance, and to “step up” the process of Iraqi forces taking over from American troops in a fight against Al Qaeda-linked “terrorists”.

Now, the Bush administration has abandoned any pretence that the occupation is “helping” to enforce the Iraqi government’s authority, even as it continues to absurdly portray Maliki as the elected head of a democratic and sovereign state. The surge is being accompanied by divide-and-rule policies that are accelerating the fragmentation of Iraq into sectarian and ethnic enclaves.

In Sunni areas of western and central Iraq, Petraeus has authorised his officers to buy provincial- or local-level alliances with tribal leaders and insurgent warlords who agree to cease attacks on US forces and cooperate in operations against die-hard insurgents. *USA Today* reported claims on Tuesday that such deals have put over 25,000 Sunni militiamen on the US military’s pay-roll. In most cases, Petraeus’s new mercenary allies were previously loyal to the Sunni-based Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein and are completely hostile to Maliki’s government. Maliki has been powerless to prevent the US sponsorship of militias that advocate his overthrow because the US simply dismisses his objections out of hand.

While it is still evolving, this policy is creating an alternative base of support in Sunni areas for Washington’s regime in Baghdad, while at the same time undermining the anti-Baathist Shiite fundamentalist parties on which the US has primarily rested since 2003. Maliki’s hold on power is becoming increasingly tenuous.

Sunni parties and a so-called “secular” grouping headed by long-time US stooge Iyad Allawi walked out of the cabinet this week, leaving Maliki isolated atop an unstable and diminishing coalition. Baghdad is swirling with rumours that an attempt will be made to bring down Maliki when the parliament resumes on September 5 and form a new government based on a coalition of Sunni, non-fundamentalist Shiite and Kurdish parties.

As more deals are made with Sunni groups, the US military is shifting its emphasis from Sunni “Al Qaeda terrorists” as the main enemy to allegedly Iranian-backed Shiite militias, particularly “rogue elements” of the large Jaish al-Mahdi (JAM) or Mahdi Army militia loyal to cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. This is despite the never-ending barrage from the White House, and Bush in particular, declaring that the US must remain in Iraq to fight the “war on terror” and “Al Qaeda”.

Odierno told the Associated Press on Sunday: “Because of the effect we have had on Al Qaeda in Iraq and the success against them and the Sunni insurgency, it’s now shifted and so we are focusing very much more on the special groups of the Jaish al-Mahdi here in Baghdad. They tend to be breakaway groups from Sadr, who tend to be funded by Iran, armed by Iran and trained by Iran.”

Odierno claimed that Iranian-sponsored Shiites were now responsible for 73 percent of all attacks on American and allied troops. The general accused Iran of attempting to cause instability in Iraq in order to undermine Petraeus’s ability to report “success” in September. He stated: “I think they [Iran] are surging their support to these groups based on the September report. They’re sending more money in, they’re training more individuals and they’re sending more weapons in.”

Odierno provided no evidence to support his sweeping allegations. His comments, coming just 24 hours before the US ambassador in Iraq, Ryan Crocker, and Iranian diplomats held another round of talks

in Baghdad on Iraqi security, were highly provocative. The accusations no doubt provided more ammunition for Crocker to denounce Iran for hurting US interests in Iraq, while forming part of the continuing US propaganda campaign aimed at vilifying Tehran to American and international audiences. Crocker again accused Iran of escalating, not de-escalating support for Shiite militias, while acknowledging that Iranian officials denied any involvement at all.

The accusations that Iran is “meddling in” and “destabilising” Iraq are grossly hypocritical. The United States illegally invaded the country, is occupying it with over 160,000 American troops and has created a catastrophe for the Iraqi people. The Bush administration treats the “sovereign” government in Baghdad with complete contempt, setting “benchmarks” that it must meet to retain US backing, including, above all, the opening of Iraqi oil wealth to plunder by American corporations.

In the upside-down world of US propaganda, Odierno’s warnings about the “main enemy” being Iran and its Shiite allies in Iraq may contain a small nugget of truth. With just over a month to go before a report to the US Congress and with little to show in the way of “success,” the Bush administration and the Pentagon could well make the “Iranian threat” a central feature of their document. Not only would this conveniently make Tehran a scapegoat for US failure, but it would place the issue of dealing with Iran squarely before Congress.

US preparations for a conflict with Tehran are undeniable. Airbases in Iraq have been upgraded to support round-the-clock operations by the US airforce; a large part of the US Navy, including two aircraft carriers, is positioned off Iran’s coast; and diplomatic efforts have been undertaken to align Sunni Arab regional rivals of Iran such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt behind any US aggression. Last, but not least, the US military acknowledged this week that troop levels in Iraq had now reached nearly 162,000—higher than at any other stage of the war.

Far from withdrawal from Iraq being on the agenda, the trajectory of US foreign policy is for an expansion of militarist aggression into an even bloodier and catastrophic conflagration—with Iran on top of the list of targets.



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