

Thousands of Iraqis protest agreement for indefinite US occupation

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31 May 2008

Tens of thousands of Iraqis protested in a number of cities Friday against the proposed agreement between the puppet regime of Nouri al-Maliki and the Bush administration that would codify a long-term US military occupation.

In a secret videoconference last November, Maliki and Bush signed an agreement, a cynically titled "Declaration of Principles for a Long-Term Relationship of Cooperation and Friendship," which outlined plans for the establishment of permanent American military bases and preferential treatment for US energy conglomerates and investors to exploit Iraqi oil reserves. The full details of the pact, including the general dimensions of the American occupation force, were to be worked out by July 31, 2008.

Negotiations on the deal began in March and US officials have told the media that the two governments are close to an agreement. The White House and the Pentagon claim that the deal is merely intended to replace the United Nations mandate that expires December 31.

Last month, US ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker claimed during a US Senate hearing that the agreement would cover the "basic authorizations and protections" to allow American troops to continue their operations but would not specify troop levels or establish permanent bases.

Crocker asserted, "We anticipate that it will expressly forswear them [permanent bases] ... and it will not tie the hands of the next administration." These are simply new lies from the Bush administration. Whether the agreement calls the US facilities "permanent bases" or not, or sidesteps the issue altogether, such a deal has no other purpose apart from ensuring that the US military will remain indefinitely to suppress internal opposition and protect American geopolitical interests, above all, its designs on Iraqi oil supplies.

On the eve of Crocker's testimony in April, the *Guardian* in Britain published an account of what it called a "secret" draft of the US-Iraqi deal, noting that it "shows that provision is being made for an open-ended military presence in the country." Debka-Net-Weekly, a web site associated with Israeli military intelligence, alleged that the US had plans to leave behind 50,000 troops by 2009 in 20 huge land and air bases.

Crocker reasserted the administration's position that the bilateral deal did not need to be and would not be submitted to the Senate for approval. Instead the so-called Status of Forces Agreement would be imposed by executive order.

According to a Defense Department official, the agreement is needed "to make sure our forces in Iraq have the tools they need to be able to do the job they need to. Our forces need to be able to defend themselves." Such "tools" include the US forces' right to detain new "terrorist" suspects and continue to incarcerate the tens of thousands already in Iraqi prisons.

Friday's demonstrations in Iraq against the agreement were organized by the movement headed by Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. A statement from his office called the US-Iraqi negotiations "a project of humiliation for the Iraqi people." Sadr has appealed for demonstrations every Friday after prayers "until further notice or until the treaty is canceled." He demanded that the government not sign the agreement, because "it is against the interests of the Iraqi people."

In a statement, Sadr called for a timetable for the withdrawal of US troops and called for delegations from his movement to approach the UN, the European Union, the Arab League and Iraq's neighbors to explain its opposition. If the government continues with its project, Sadr indicated his movement would "work to collect millions of signatures opposing it."

Sadr also called for a popular referendum on any agreement allowing US troops to stay past December 31, 2008. He appealed for "an organized media action" and "a unified political and parliamentary movement" to oppose the US-Iraqi deal.

One of his spokesmen in parliament, Salah al-Obeidi, declared, "The agreement is against Islam. There is no religious basis for an agreement like this." He also declared that the call for protests was not a "threat" to the Maliki regime, but a "warning."

Another leading Sadrist, Sheikh Mohannad Al-Gazawi, decried the agreement, stating that it "binds Iraq and gives 99 percent of the country to America."

Protesters in Baghdad Friday carried signs and banners denouncing "the disastrous agreement that tears Iraq apart and gives in to the occupying power." Another placard, according to AFP, declared, "This agreement surrenders the sovereignty of Iraq." Demonstrators burned Maliki in effigy as well as US flags. They chanted "No to America! No to the occupation!"

"This isn't an Iraqi government, it's an American government," Mohammed Mohsin, a 25-year-old laborer told the *New York Times* in Sadr City. "The Americans keep pressuring Maliki to carry out what they want," he said. "The agreement will only serve the Americans' interests."

Protests were also held Friday in Kut, Najaf, Basra, Nassiriya

and other cities.

Other Iraqi parties and groups have denounced the treaty as well. Last week, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, one of the country's leading Shiite clerics reportedly expressed his opposition, saying he would not permit the Iraqi regime to sign such a deal with the "US occupiers" as long as he was alive.

Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, head of the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council, the largest Shiite faction in Maliki's fragile coalition government, criticized the agreement to extend the US occupation. In a statement on his web site, Hakim said that there was a "national consensus to reject many points raised by the American side as they infringe national sovereignty."

Last November, after Bush and Maliki signed the provisional agreement, a variety of Sunni Arab politicians denounced it, declaring that it would permit "US interference [in Iraq] for years to come." The Association of Muslim Scholars declared that any Iraqi signatories of the document would be looked on as "collaborators with the occupier."

On Tuesday Iraq's national security council urged Maliki to negotiate a deal "that is satisfactory to the people of Iraq and does not harm its interests."

Washington is obviously placing immense pressure on the Maliki government to carry through with the negotiations and signing of the agreement, thereby placing the puppet regime in a politically untenable position. The *Times* observed Friday: "The raw feelings that the negotiations engender among many Iraqis—who view the prospects of a long-term American troop presence as demeaning and humiliating—underscores the political risks the negotiations hold for Mr. Maliki's government."

"Indeed, some top members of the Shiite and Kurdish coalition that has formed Mr. Maliki's deepest base of support are now having reservations about agreeing to a new security pact before Iraq holds parliamentary elections later this year, lest they appear to Iraqi voters as being too compliant to American demands."

Even one of Maliki's closest allies, Ali Adeeb, a senior member of the prime minister's own Dawa Party, expressed reservations, according to the *Times*: "This agreement is between Iraq and the United States president, and the American policy is not clear.... Therefore, we can wait until the American elections to deal with a Democratic or Republican president."

A senior Iranian cleric last week denounced the proposed agreement as treachery to Islam, claiming it would permit the US to launch attacks on Iran from Iraq, prevent Iraqi courts from trying US citizens and place Iraqi ministries under American control.

Underscoring the intense instability of the Iraqi regime, the largest Sunni Arab political bloc announced Wednesday that it had suspended talks aimed at bringing it back into the government. "The talks yielded nothing and the government's response was not in line with our demands so we have decided to suspend them," declared Adnan al-Dulaimi, leader of the Sunni National Accordance Front.

The Accordance Front withdrew from the Maliki "national unity" government last August, demanding the release of Sunni detainees and a greater voice in security issues.

The Sunni bloc comprises three parties with 44 seats in the Iraqi

parliament. The decision to break off talks was made after Maliki refused to allow the bloc to have one of its representatives named as head of the Planning Ministry. The prime minister had offered the Communications post instead.

The Planning Ministry is considered to be more important, and, moreover, the current head of the ministry is a former member of the Sunni bloc who broke with the Accordance Front after it pulled out of the government last year and returned to his cabinet position. He was subsequently expelled.

The announcement by the Sunni bloc came on the eve of Maliki's attendance at an international conference on Iraq in Stockholm. It was not expected to help the prime minister convince Sunni Arab states attending the gathering to offer more support to Baghdad as a means of countering Iran's growing influence.

The governments of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, two predominantly Sunni countries and Iraq's largest creditors, pointedly sent only lower-level officials to the Stockholm meeting. In his speech Thursday, Maliki said that the Iraqi government was "looking forward to the brother countries writing off its [Iraq's] debts, which are a burden on the Iraqi government."

Saudi State Secretary for Foreign Affairs Nizar Madani said his government would consider "alleviating" Iraq's debt. *Reuters* noted that Saudi pledges, made ahead of last year's inaugural international conference on Iraq in Sharm al-Sheikh in Egypt, to waive Iraqi debts "came to nothing." The Iraqis and Saudis even disagree over the amount of the debts. The Maliki government claims it owes \$15 billion, while Riyadh puts the amount, with interest, at \$40 billion.

Le Monde commented bluntly, "Maliki's objective [in Stockholm] was to obtain the cancellation of the foreign debt and a reduction of war reparations [for the invasion of Kuwait in 1990]. His hopes were disappointed."

At the conference US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called on the "international community" to help Iraq strengthen its apparatus of repression. She asserted that the Iraqis "don't need large sums of money. They do need large infusions of technical assistance, project support, help to build an adequate police force, help to build an adequate justice system ... Iraq is increasingly a functioning state. The question is: can it be a capable and functioning state?"



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