US “confident” of Iraq bases agreement despite opposition

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Bush administration officials have appeared before the media to make clear that—as far as the White House is concerned—the Iraqi parliament will ratify two agreements that sanction long-term military bases and the indefinite US use of Iraq’s territory and airspace.

A Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) will govern the right of American forces and military contractors to operate inside Iraq after the December 31 expiry of a United Nations Security Council mandate. A second, a so-called Strategic Framework Agreement, centres on a US security guarantee to “defend” Iraq against any “external” attack. The Bush administration and the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki had named July 31 as the deadline for negotiations on the agreements. If no SOFA can be agreed, the US will have to seek another mandate from the UN.

David Satterfield, the head Iraq advisor for the State Department, told journalists on Tuesday: “We’re confident it can be achieved and by the July 31 deadline. It’s doable and that’s where our focus is, not on alternatives. We’re focused on Plan A because we believe Plan A can succeed.” Defense Secretary Robert Gates made similar statements.

The remarks came in response to an Associated Press (AP) article on Monday that quoted an unnamed administration official as saying that opposition from within Maliki’s government meant it was “very possible” that nothing could be finalised in time. A White House spokesman, Gordon Johndroe, declared the AP report was “not accurate” and that the Iraqis “would like to see an agreement”.

The press statements were also a reaction to public calls by Iranian leaders for Iraqi politicians to oppose the pacts. Maliki travelled to Tehran to try to convince Iran that any agreements between the US and Iraq were not a threat to Iranian interests. He told a press conference on Sunday: “We will not allow Iraq to become a platform for harming the security of Iran and its neighbours.”

Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, rejected Maliki’s reassurances as he stood beside him on Monday. In a televised speech, Khamenei appealed to “the Iraqi government, parliament and all the authorities who have been elected by public vote to take charge” and ensure that “the American dreams will not be realised”. He declared: “The fact that a foreign element wants to interfere in the affairs of Iraq and dominate the country... is the main problem for the development and well-being of the Iraqis”.

US officials have issued repeated denials that the Bush administration is seeking permanent bases in Iraq or unfettered rights to conduct operations from inside Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East.

Members of Maliki’s government, however, told McClatchy Newspapers on Monday that the SOFA draft provided the US military ongoing use of 58 facilities inside Iraq. The agreement would be open-ended and could be cancelled only with two years’ notice. It included conditions such as control of Iraqi airspace up to 30,000 feet and legal immunity for all US military and military contractor personnel.

Jalal al Din Saghir, a member of the largest Shiite party in the government, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), labelled the draft “abominable”. He told McClatchy: “Is there sovereignty for Iraq or isn’t there? If it is left to them [the US administration] they would ask for immunity even for American dogs.”

Ali al Adeeb, a leading member of Maliki’s Da’wa Party, told McClatchy that in the talks on the Strategic Framework Agreement, “the Americans insist so far that it is they who define what [represents] aggression on Iraq”. The Bush administration’s accusations that the Iranian military is arming and training Shiite insurgents resisting the occupation therefore could be manipulated to justify an attack on Iran on the grounds of defending Iraqi sovereignty.

ISCI, Da’wa and the Kurdish parties that make up Maliki’s government have publicly declared their support for a US security guarantee and for American troops to stay in large numbers. They have been the primary local beneficiaries of the US occupation, which has stripped power, privileges and wealth from the Sunni Arab ruling elite that dominated the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein. The governing parties have nevertheless refused to accept

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the agreements thus far and have asked Washington to modify the terms so that the agreements can be portrayed as an affirmation of Iraqi self-rule—rather than a confirmation that Iraq is nothing more than an American client-state.

After more than five years of occupation, more than one million dead and over four million people forced from their homes, the majority of Iraqis oppose any US presence in Iraq. A major concern within the Iraqi government is that the blatantly neo-colonial terms of the agreements could reignite widespread armed resistance, which has only been bought off or brutally suppressed in the main Sunni and Shiite regions of the country over the past 12 months.

ISCI and Da'wa also have particular fears that any acceptance of the initial terms would compromise them so much that their rivals in the Shiite establishment would make major gains at their expense in the provincial elections scheduled for November.

The movement loyal to cleric Moqtada al-Sadr is trying to strengthen its influence with a populist campaign against the two agreements. It is holding rallies each Friday in Baghdad and southern Iraqi cities. Sadrist speakers have denounced ISCI and Da'wa as US puppets, called for a timetable for an American withdrawal and demanded a referendum on any proposed agreement that allows US forces to remain in Iraq after this year.

In addition, Ibrahim al-Jaafari, the former Da'wa leader and "transitional" prime minister in 2005, has split with the government and formed an opposition group.

The Shiite governing parties are equally concerned over the prospect of a US strike on Iran from Iraqi territory. Iraq would inevitably become a battleground in a US-Iran war, threatening the prospect of anti-American and anti-government uprisings among Iraqi Shiites. Moreover, since the Shiite parties established a dominant position in Baghdad in 2005, they have made no secret of their ambitions for closer economic relations with Iran, as opposed to Saddam Hussein's orientation toward Sunni Arab states.

According to several media reports this week, the Bush administration has proposed amendments to the agreements to accommodate to the concerns in Maliki's government. The same official who told the AP that it was "very possible" no agreement would be reached, said the question of permanent bases could be dodged by allowing the US military "to operate out of US, Iraqi or joint facilities through either short or long term contracts". AP reported: "Those facilities, the official said, could belong to the Iraqis, and the US would simply be using them on a renewable basis."

Iraqi politicians told AP that Washington had offered to insert clauses stipulating that US forces in Iraq would not attack neighbouring countries and that they will notify the Iraqi authorities before conducting operations inside the country. US troops would still be able to arrest and detain Iraqi citizens, but would have to hand them over to Iraqi forces. Kurdish politician Mamoud Othman told the *Washington Post* on Tuesday that the Bush administration had also agreed that private contractors would no longer be guaranteed legal immunity from Iraqi prosecution.

At the same time, the British *Independent's* Patrick Cockburn reported last Friday that the Bush administration is employing financial threats.

Under the terms of the UN mandate, Iraq's oil revenues must be paid into the "Development Fund for Iraq", which is operated through the US Federal Reserve. Currently, some $50 billion of Iraqi currency reserves are being held in New York. The US Treasury has used its powers to veto Iraqi requests to diversify some of its reserves out of the depreciating US dollar into other currencies. Iraqi officials claim they have lost at least $5 billion as a result. As long as the US occupation is mandated by the UN, this situation can continue.

According to Cockburn's sources, the Bush White House has told the Maliki government that if treaties acceptable to Washington are not negotiated, it will allow a presidential order to lapse that gives Iraqi government funds immunity from some $20 billion in outstanding legal claims. Iraq stands to immediately lose 40 percent of its current foreign currency reserves.

Cockburn concluded: "Given intense US pressure on a weak Iraqi government very dependent on US support, it is still probable that the agreement will go through with only cosmetic changes."

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