

Obama in Iraq underscores his commitment to US militarism

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The visit of US presidential candidate Barack Obama to Iraq on Monday underscores once again that the millions of American workers and youth who oppose militarism have been completely disenfranchised by the Democratic Party. The Illinois senator used the trip to make clear his commitment to the indefinite occupation of Iraq, as well as to agitate further for his policy of redeploying troops from the Middle East in order to escalate the war in Afghanistan.

Obama took every opportunity to be photographed and filmed in the company of military commanders and personnel. The trip was primarily aimed, however, at trying to manufacture a shift in the political calculus within the presidential campaign. Until now, the tenuous character of the so-called successes of the Bush administration's "surge" of troops last year—a reduction in the rate of US casualties and ebb in the overall level of violence inside Iraq—has been used by the White House and Republican candidate John McCain as evidence that no timetable can be placed on the withdrawal of US combat troops from the country.

Obama sought to turn the argument on its head. As he left a meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, he told journalists he was "pleased with the progress taking place". In his statement on the visit, he declared he had found "a strong, emerging consensus" that sufficient progress had been made to begin planning "to refocus our foreign policy on the many other challenges around the world starting with the resurgence of Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan".

Obama made particular use of the endorsement of his policies by the Iraqi government. Obama asserted that Maliki "said that now is an appropriate time to start to plan for the reorganisation of our troops in Iraq" and had "stated his hope that US combat forces could be out of Iraq in 2010". Obama declared that Iraqi Vice President Adil Abdul Mahdi—a favourite of the Washington

establishment—had noted that "the quality of American engagement matters more than the quantity".

Obama's statements demonstrate that he holds no principled opposition to the Iraq war. Rather, his presidential candidacy is the vehicle for sections of the financial and corporate elite who consider the 2003 invasion to have been a strategically reckless use of American military power that has only aggravated the decline of US global influence. The reorientation to Afghanistan is primarily aimed at asserting US interests in Central Asia and disrupting the economic, political and military alignments emerging between powers such as China, Russia, Iran, India and western European states.

At the same time, the Democratic candidate is seeking to reassure the ruling elite that he would be a reliable defender of US imperialist interests in Iraq and the Middle East. The withdrawal of "combat troops" is a code word for the shared plans of both the Republicans and the Democrats that would retain a force numbering anywhere up to 60,000 in Iraq in remote and heavily fortified bases such as Balad, Al Asad, Talil and Taji. Iraq will remain an American client state, with the massive US embassy in Baghdad serving as the real centre of political power.

The Obama camp feels confident in advancing calls for a withdrawal timetable due to the current situation in Iraq. After more than five years of bloody occupation, a degree of stability has been achieved. Moreover, the puppet Iraqi government has finally begun to implement policies aimed at allowing foreign companies to take stakes in Iraq's massive oil and gas reserves—one of the key motives for the war.

During his visit, Obama made no mention of either the illegal character of the 2003 invasion or how the "surge" has somewhat stabilised Iraq under US domination. The truth is that consolidation of the occupation has been accomplished by wholesale killing, collective punishment against civilians supporting resistance and mass

detentions. Throughout 2006 and 2007, the occupation unleashed death squads and fomented sectarian tensions in order to trigger pogroms and ethnic cleansing.

An estimated 1.2 million Iraqis have lost their lives and over five million turned into refugees or displaced. One factor in the ebb in the anti-occupation insurgency is large numbers of resistance fighters are either dead, seriously injured, traumatised to the point where they cannot fight, or not in the country any more. In the process, over 4,100 American soldiers have lost their lives, with tens of thousands more wounded or harmed in some way.

The so-called “political progress” that was praised by Obama on Monday has consisted of a policy of dividing the country along sectarian and ethnic lines. Behind the façade of Maliki’s “national unity” government, the US occupation has presided over the carving out of Kurdish, Shiite and Sunni spheres of influence, creating numerous fault lines that could trigger civil war or regional wars in the Middle East.

The fragility of the situation inside Iraq goes to the heart of the continuing opposition to Obama’s policies in US ruling circles, including the increasingly blatant attempts by sections of the US military hierarchy to influence the outcome of the election in favour of Republican candidate John McCain. Opponents of a major reduction in troop numbers in Iraq fear that it will create a vacuum that Iran and potentially other powers will intervene to fill, at the expense of US interests. They insist that any decision about reducing the US footprint in Iraq has to be based on the “conditions on the ground”.

The WSWS has commented on the explicit rejection of a timetable for the withdrawal of combat troops from Iraq by Admiral Michael Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, during an interview Sunday with Fox News. Attacking Obama’s policies as “dangerous,” Mullen declared: “I’d worry about any kind of rapid movement out and creating instability where we have stability.” He indicated this position was shared by the key US commanders in Iraq, General David Petraeus and General Raymond Odierno.

Obama again demonstrated the subservience of the Democrats to the military top brass during an interview yesterday with CBS’s Katie Couric. Asked whether he would proceed with troop withdrawals in the face of opposition from Mullen and Petraeus, Obama refrained from making any criticism of the admiral’s statements or condemning the military for its political intervention. Instead, he stated, “I will always listen to the commanders on the ground” although Iraq was just one “security

problem” that had to be dealt with, alongside Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran.

Couric repeatedly hammered Obama over a statement the previous day that in hindsight he would still have voted against the surge of US troops in Iraq. Asked again and again why he refused to give any credit to the “surge” for reducing violence in Iraq, he ultimately backed away, saying “of course I have”.

Obama’s political cowardice was used by McCain, whose campaign has been overshadowed this week by the attention on Obama’s world tour, to denounce the Democratic candidate as a defeatist. In an interview with Couric that followed Obama’s, the Republican candidate openly associated his policies with the views of the military.

McCain said: “Senator Obama has indicated that by his failure to acknowledge the success of the surge, that he would rather lose a war than lose a campaign... I will not do what the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said would be very dangerous. We will have a stable Iraq that we won’t have to return to because we have succeeded in the strategy and we will come home with victory and honor and not in defeat.”

The presidential campaign has evolved into a foreign policy conflict between sections of the American ruling elite, with the Republicans and Democrats debating the best means for maintaining the US military presence in Iraq while dealing with an escalating war in Afghanistan. The desire of millions of Americans for an end to the Bush administration’s neo-colonial wars will be given no expression within the two-party system.

To describe Obama as “antiwar,” in any sense, is an exercise in either deception or self-delusion. His visit to Iraq makes clear that he speaks for those who believe that a tactical reorientation of US strategy is required to re-direct American military forces to deal with challenges to US strategic and corporate interests elsewhere.



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