

Iraqis protest against proposed security agreement with US

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Tens of thousands of Iraqis marched from the working class districts of Sadr City to the centre of Baghdad on Saturday to denounce moves by the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to finalise a security agreement with the Bush administration. The pact is intended to provide a fig-leaf of legality for the ongoing occupation of Iraq by the US military after a United Nations mandate expires on December 31.

The demonstration was organised by the Shiite movement of cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and appears to have been in part aimed at refurbishing its anti-occupation credentials. Political support for the Sadrists has been waning since Sadr's accommodation with the destruction of the movement's armed wing, the Mahdi Army, during a series of US military and Iraqi government offensives earlier in the year. A statement by Sadr—who is believed to be in Iran—was read to the crowd condemning the security pact as a violation of Iraqi sovereignty. Other speakers demanded the immediate withdrawal of foreign troops, while effigies of Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice were burned.

The political calculations of the Sadrists aside, the protest underscored again the depth of opposition among the Iraqi working class and urban poor to the US occupation, which has cost the lives of over one million people and devastated much of the country. The only local beneficiaries of the American invasion are those who have positions in the US-backed government and are using them to funnel millions of dollars into their pockets. Last month, Iraq was ranked as the second-most corrupt state by the Corruption Perceptions Index, out of 180 surveyed countries. Major foreign firms have also benefited, such as contractors Haliburton and Bechtel and the major oil

conglomerates that are bidding for a stake in the soon-to-be-privatised Iraqi oil industry.

The carefully-worded security agreement reflects both the complete dependence of the new Iraqi establishment on ongoing US backing and the determination of Washington to ensure that Iraq and its energy resources remain under US domination. It stipulates the withdrawal of US troops from Baghdad and other cities by June 2009 and from the country as a whole by the end of 2011. The withdrawal, however, will be dependent on "Iraq's assessment of the conditions on the ground"—meaning it can be pushed back any time at will.

The most important caveat allows a reduced American force to remain indefinitely. Even under the most stable of conditions, the Iraqi government can "request" that US troops remain to provide "training" or "support Iraqi security forces". As Iraq lacks anything resembling a modern air force to support its military, this will allow the US air force and supporting ground units to continue to operate out of the major bases that have been constructed in strategic parts of the country.

American troops and government employees are guaranteed immunity from Iraqi law while inside these bases or on "authorised military operations". The Iraqi government will only have "primary" jurisdiction under other circumstances and only in the case of "premeditated and gross felonies". Thus the murder of an Iraqi by an American soldier will remain under US jurisdiction unless the act can be demonstrated to be "premeditated". The *Washington Post* reported that American officials "consider the language in the document vague enough to ensure absolute US control in all circumstances".

While the Maliki government has claimed that private contractors such as Blackwater will be stripped of their

immunity from Iraqi law, a loophole exists. If their contracts are issued by the US Defense Department, mercenaries would be protected by the wording of the security agreement as they would legally be "employees" of the US military.

Overall, the timetable for troop withdrawals dovetails with the political consensus that has emerged in US ruling circles, championed most vocally by Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama, that combat forces must be pulled out from Iraq in order to bolster the occupation force in Afghanistan or to be available for other interventions.

Finalising the agreement, however, is being held up by the political realities in Iraq—above all by the extent of opposition to any security pact with the US and the requirement that a majority of the Iraqi parliament vote in favour of it.

With provincial elections scheduled to take place by January 31, 2009, the two Shiite parties that dominate Maliki's government are reluctant to vote "yes" out of concerns it will trigger a voter backlash across the predominantly Shiite-populated southern provinces. While the Sadrists are not standing their own candidates, they have stated they will support "independents" against Maliki's Da'wa Party and the largest Shiite party, the Iraqi Supreme Islamic Council (ISCI).

The ruling Shiite fundamentalist parties are also being affected by the Iranian government's opposition to any long-term Iraqi pact with the US. ISCI, in particular, has historic links with the Iranian establishment. While the extent of Tehran's influence is limited by the US occupation, there is no question that a formal denunciation of Maliki and the ISCI leadership by the Iranian clerical hierarchy would have an impact among religious Shiites in Iraq.

In the wake of Saturday's demonstration, the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA)—a coalition of Da'wa, ISCI and several smaller Shiite parties—issued a statement calling for new talks on the agreement "to amend some of its articles", without naming specific points of contention.

The Sunni-based parliamentary parties also declared they were still "reviewing" the agreement. They have their own electoral concerns. The grouping, which has collaborated with the occupation since 2003, is being challenged in the coming elections by Sunni factions based on the "Awakening" militias—former Sunni

insurgents who agreed to cease fighting US forces in 2007 in exchange for payment and protection from the Shiite-dominated security forces.

The only parties that have given their clear support for the pact are the Kurdish nationalist parties, who exercise autocratic control over the autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq and do not face elections in the coming months.

Maliki's Political Council for National Security has referred the proposed agreement to a cabinet meeting today. Maliki himself has made no public statement either in favour or against the agreement or indicated how long the cabinet is likely to discuss it before sending it to parliament for a vote.

The delays suggest that Maliki and his inner circle may not want to conclude anything with Bush, who is arguably hated by a greater percentage of the Iraqi population than Saddam Hussein. UIA legislator Qassem Dawood told the *Chicago Tribune*: "He [Maliki] feels it's a sort of agreement between the 'Great Satan' and Iraq and he doesn't want to be in put in this position."

The Iraqi government may prefer to wait and see who wins the November 4 US presidential elections.



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