

Iraqi cabinet stalls on US security agreement

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Progress toward the signing of a bilateral US-Iraqi security agreement sanctioning a continued American military presence in Iraq has stalled again. On Tuesday, the Iraqi cabinet of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki officially rejected the pact which had been formulated through months of tortured negotiations between American and Iraqi officials.

By all accounts, the parties that were the most insistent that the agreement be modified were the Shiite fundamentalist organisations, Maliki's Da'wa Party and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), that dominate the government and have been crucial supporters of the US occupation.

The Bush administration has been asked to make several key changes:

The cabinet rejected a clause in the agreement that set a December 31, 2011 deadline for the end of the US occupation "dependent on conditions on the ground". A proposed amendment would make the date fixed.

Contrary to misleading claims that the change would mean a withdrawal of all US troops, the agreement would still allow Baghdad to request an ongoing US presence to provide "training" or "support" to the Iraqi military. The character of the ongoing "support" will be dealt with in a separate Strategic Framework Agreement covering US defence commitments to Iraq and the long-term use of Iraqi bases by American forces.

Following last Sunday's raid into Syria by American special forces, the Iraqi cabinet has also demanded an explicit ban on the US military using Iraqi territory to attack other states.

Revisions to the proposed legal immunity for American personnel have also been requested. In the current draft, American troops and government employees are guaranteed immunity from Iraqi law while inside their bases or on "authorised military operations".

According to McClatchy News, "the amendments would give Iraqi authorities the right to determine whether a US service member was on- or off-duty when he or she committed an alleged crime outside American bases, [and] where such an American would be tried".

Another proposed change would give Iraq the power to inspect all US military cargo imported into the country.

With the current UN mandate due to expire on December 31, time is running out to finalise a deal and US officials have indicated frustration with the new Iraqi demands. The public response of the White House, however, has been relatively muted. Bush stated on Wednesday that his administration was "analysing those amendments" and that he remained "very hopeful and confident" an agreement would be struck before December 31.

Behind-the-scenes, it appears that harsher words were said. On Sunday, General Raymond Odierno, the commander of US forces in Iraq, reportedly dispatched a three-page memo to Iraqi officials threatening that American troops would withdraw into their bases and cease performing an array of functions if the deadline was not met. US forces, for example, operate Iraq's entire civilian air traffic control system. As well, he warned that over 200,000 Iraqis employed by the US military would be laid off.

A senior Iraqi Kurdish politician, Mahmoud Othman,

described the memo as “an obvious attempt at blackmail”.

American occupation forces provide the Iraqi army’s air support, intelligence, communications, logistics and maintenance. Odierno allegedly threatened that all backing would cease and that \$10 billion in arms sales would be cancelled.

The fact that the cabinet nevertheless demanded the amendments is a measure of its reluctance to sign the security agreement at the present time.

Most Iraqis are deeply hostile to the US occupation in the country and hate the Bush administration. The illegal war of aggression launched in March 2003 on false claims of “weapons of mass destruction” and terrorism links has caused hundreds of thousands of deaths, destroyed much of the country and traumatised the population for at least a generation.

While defenders of the war try to justify the carnage on the grounds it has produced “democracy”, elections were only open to those parties, such as the Shiite fundamentalists and Kurdish nationalists, that accepted the legitimacy of the US invasion and its neo-colonial occupation. Those fighting the foreign invaders were branded in Orwellian terms as “Anti-Iraqi Forces”.

The expiry of the UN mandate coincides with the next cycle of elections in Iraq. Provincial elections in 14 Iraqi provinces are scheduled to take place by January 31. The only areas excluded are the three provinces that make up the autonomous Kurdish region, and the disputed oil-rich province of Kirkuk, which is claimed by the Kurdish nationalists.

Da’wa and ISCI have a great deal at stake. They aim to retain their control over the majority Shiite-populated southern provinces. In many areas, however, they are being challenged by political figures with links to the Sadr movement of cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, which portrays itself as a nationalist defender of the Iraqi poor against both the Shiite elite and the US.

By insisting on amendments to the security agreement, Da’wa and ISCI have sought to neutralise the

accusation that they are US puppets by asserting that they are reclaiming Iraqi sovereignty from the invader.

The main Shiite parties were tacitly backed on Wednesday by the head Shiite cleric in Iraq, Ali al-Sistani, whose opinions still carry considerable weight among religious Shiites. His office in Najaf issued a statement, declaring: “Ayatollah Ali Sistani insists that the sovereignty of Iraq not be touched and he is closely following developments until the final accord has been clarified.”

The other obvious reason for stalling the agreement is that the US election is just days away, with the expected result being the election of Democratic candidate Barack Obama.

In contrast to the Bush administration and Republican John McCain, Obama has stated a preparedness to hold talks with the Shiite Iranian regime, with which all Shiite parties in Iraq, ISCI in particular, have historic ties and close relations.

Until now, Iranian leaders and clerics have spoken out against any Iraqi-US security agreement and appealed to their Iraqi allies not to sign it. That could shift after November 4, if Tehran’s cooperation was seen as likely to advance a further easing of US-Iranian tensions once Obama took office next year.



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