

US-Iraq security agreement set to be ratified

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The cabinet of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki accepted the final draft of a bilateral security agreement with the United States on Sunday. The pact, which has been under negotiation for the best part of a year, was read to the Iraqi parliament the following day and will be put to the vote next Monday. It is designed to replace the United Nations mandate that sanctioned the US occupation of Iraq and which expires on December 31.

The agreement is likely to be ratified. In the parliament, it is supported by the member-parties of the Shiite fundamentalist coalition—the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA)—which dominates Maliki's government. It is also supported by the Kurdish nationalist parties and by the Iraqi National List, a coalition headed by the party of Iyad Allawi, who was installed as interim Iraqi prime minister in 2004. Combined, these blocs have a majority in the 275-seat legislature.

The largest Sunni Arab-based grouping, the Iraqi Islamic Party, is still officially calling for a popular referendum to ratify the security agreement but is expected to use the week-long debate in parliament to fall into line and vote yes, in exchange for various political concessions and pay-offs.

The only significant opposition is coming from the Shiite movement led by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, which still has a broad following among the Shiite working class and urban poor. It is doubtful, however, that it will be able to garner sufficient parliamentary support to vote down the pact.

The protracted negotiations over the agreement, during which seven earlier drafts were rejected by Maliki's cabinet, were largely the product of manoeuvring by the UIA.

Provincial elections are set to take place in Iraq on January 31, 2009. The two main parties in the UIA—Maliki's Da'wa Party and the Islamic Supreme

Council of Iraq (ISCI)—currently dominate the provincial governments in southern Iraq and are determined to keep their control. They were deeply concerned that signing an agreement with the Bush White House would allow their opponents to condemn them as the organisations responsible for allowing an indefinite US occupation.

It is now clear that they did not want to agree to anything until the US presidential race was decided. The Iraqi Shiite parties, especially ISCI, have close ties with the Shiite fundamentalist Iranian regime. As well as fearing a domestic backlash, they were wary about alienating Tehran, which has vocally opposed a US-Iraqi pact with a Republican administration that has repeatedly threatened to attack Iran.

Iran views the election of Obama as an opportunity to reach a rapprochement with Washington. With its economy disintegrating, the Iranian government and clerical elite have hopes they will be able to negotiate an easing of the sanctions that are crippling the country.

Since November 4, there have been ample signs that the Iranian regime has dropped its opposition to Maliki finalising the security agreement—no doubt as a signal to the incoming Obama administration that it is looking for a deal.

Following Sunday's cabinet decision, the head of Iran's judiciary, Iraqi-born cleric Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, publicly declared that Maliki had "acted well". Shahroudi is a close confidante of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of the Iranian state, who has the final say over foreign and defence policy. The Iranian government of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has made no official response—itsself an indicator of tacit support.

The leading Shiite cleric in Iraq, Iranian-born Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, whose opinion carries considerable weight among religious Shiites, also

reportedly gave his blessing to the final draft of the pact, after months of expressing concerns.

The amendments insisted on by Maliki and ISCI were all aimed at enabling them to present the agreement as dictating an American "withdrawal" from Iraq.

Initial drafts specified that any withdrawal timetable would be based on an assessment of "conditions on the ground". The final version states that US combat troops must leave all residential areas by June 30, 2009, and pull back to specified bases, and that "US forces shall withdraw from Iraqi territory no later than December 31, 2011".

The withdrawal date is being portrayed by Maliki as proof that his government has set in motion a process that will bring an end to the US occupation, which is hated by the overwhelming majority of the population.

During an address to the nation broadcast on Tuesday, Maliki declared: "I'd like to say candidly we have our own assessments, but at the same time this is a strong beginning to get back the full sovereignty of Iraq in three years."

Iraqis, Maliki implied, would no longer be terrorised by the US military: "No detainees anymore, no detention centres anymore, or American prisons for Iraqis, no searches or raids of buildings or houses, until there is an Iraqi judicial warrant and is fully coordinated with the Iraqi government."

The reality, however, is that the pact will not end US operations in Iraq. In the short term, Maliki's government can "request" American troops move back into populated areas at any time; they can be asked to assist in the detention of Iraqi citizens; and they can be asked to run detention centres.

The clauses supposedly stripping US forces of their current legal immunity do nothing of the sort. While on duty or in their bases, American troops are still exempt from Iraqi law.

Not only American troops retain immunity, but so do civilian contractors. Providing their contract is with the US Defense Department, mercenaries are classified as "civilian members" of the armed forces and have the same legal protection as enlisted personnel.

Over the long term, the agreement enshrines one of the key strategic objectives of US imperialism that motivated the illegal 2003 invasion of Iraq—American bases in the heart of the Middle East, the main oil-producing region of the globe. The agreement states:

"The Iraqi government is permitted to ask the US government to keep specific forces for the purposes of training and support of the Iraqi security forces."

As long as a pro-US regime exists in Baghdad, the American military will be needed to prop it up against internal and external threats. Most obviously, Iraq lacks anything resembling an air force. US air power and support troops will therefore continue to operate for years to come out of the massive complexes that the occupation has constructed, such as the air base at Balad.

If the security agreement is passed by the Iraqi parliament and comes into effect on January 1, 2009, it will represent one more milestone in the reduction of Iraq to the status of a US client-state.

The next step will be the negotiation of a formal "Strategic Framework Agreement", or long-term defence treaty that will govern the operations of US forces in the country after December 31, 2011.

Far from "bringing the troops home", an Obama administration will preside over the indefinite deployment of tens of thousands of US military personnel in Iraq and attempt to complete the neo-colonial operation initiated by the Bush White House.



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