

Security agreements mean Iraq occupation will continue to 2012 and beyond

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For more than five-and-a-half years, and at the cost of the lives of at least one million Iraqis and over 4,200 Americans, the US has occupied Iraq and repressed all opposition to its presence. The Iraqi parliament's ratification of a status of forces agreement and "Strategic Framework" with the US on November 27 ensures the ongoing occupation of the country and formalises its status as a US client state.

The status of forces goes into effect on January 1, the same day a United Nations mandate expires, and provides a legal framework for American operations inside Iraq until December 31, 2011. President-elect Barack Obama has put his stamp of approval on the new arrangements.

With the armed resistance largely drowned in blood, US combat troops will pull back to some 400 fortified bases outside the country's population centres by the middle of next year. The Iraqi government, however, can at any time request American military assistance in combat operations against "terrorists", "outlaw groups" and "remnants of the former regime". "Non-combat" components of the US military will provide "training, equipping, supporting, supplying and upgrading logistical systems" for the Iraqi security forces. Iraq can also request "temporary support" from the US for the "surveillance and control of Iraqi air space".

American troops and civilian contractors employed by the US Defense Department will continue to operate with full immunity from Iraqi law, except in the rare cases where they are off duty and off their bases. The US occupation forces can continue to import and export equipment and goods, and move personnel in and out

of the country without being subject to any taxes, custom charges or even inspection by Iraqi agencies.

Civilian security companies contracted by foreign embassies, aid agencies and Iraqi politicians will be stripped of immunity. It is therefore expected that most non-Iraqi personnel will leave, forcing large numbers of mercenaries to look for contracts in Afghanistan or other potential war zones.

In the end, the agreements were supported by the two main Shiite fundamentalist parties in Maliki's government—the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and Da'wa—as well as by the Kurdish nationalist parties and the Sunni-based Iraqi Accordance Front (IAF). In all, 149 of the 275 legislators in the parliament voted in favour. Of the 35 who voted against, most were loyalists from the Shiite movement of cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. The remaining legislators either abstained or were not present.

The Sunni support for the agreements was won through a range of political concessions by Maliki. A referendum will be held before July to give a popular endorsement to the pacts; amnesty will be offered to many of the estimated 25,000, predominantly Sunni detainees being held in US or Iraqi government prisons; and more of the Sunni Awakening Council militiamen recruited during the US military surge will be offered positions in the Iraqi army or public service.

The IAF's acceptance was sufficient for the agreements to gain the implicit backing of the Shiite religious elite in Iraq, headed by Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. Sistani had appealed for unity on any pact with the US. The primary concern of the clergy was that

Sunni opposition could re-ignite a large-scale insurgency against the Shiite-dominated government.

Two aspects of the agreement also overcame the opposition of the Iranian regime, which is close to both ISCI and Da'wa. US forces are prohibited from storing "weapons of mass destruction" such as nuclear weapons on Iraqi territory, or using its land, air or sea space to attack other states. In another signal that Tehran hopes for better relations with the US after the inauguration of an Obama administration, a senior Iranian leader, Ahmad Jannati, hailed the agreements as "a very good decision by the Iraqi parliament".

Da'wa, ISCI and the Sunni IAF—groupings that have directly collaborated with the US since the 2003 invasion—are all seeking to use the agreement to bolster their electoral fortunes ahead of provincial elections in January. They are presenting their protracted negotiations with the Bush administration as a victory in securing a definite date for the end to the broadly hated foreign occupation.

The agreement does state that "all United States forces shall withdraw from all Iraqi territory" by the end of 2011. The barely disguised intent, however, is that the terms will be renegotiated beforehand to sanction an enduring American presence. The associated "Strategic Framework Agreement," which was signed between the Bush administration and the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki on November 28, commits both parties to a "long term relationship in economic, diplomatic, cultural and security fields".

In three years time, the Iraqi security forces will still be incapable of conducting operations against significant insurgent activity without American support, let alone defending Iraq's borders against potential regional rivals. The US occupation has not provided the Iraqi military with a modern air force, naval assets, modern tanks and artillery. A small number of advanced F-16 jet fighters and helicopters are due for delivery in 2011, but will require US personnel and maintenance systems.

David Petraeus draft the counter-insurgency plan applied in Iraq, told the *Washington Post* last month: "Everyone knows the Iraqi security forces are not going to be self-sufficient by 2011. There are going to be Americans helping Iraqis keep their F-16s in the air for at least a decade." The Iraqi ministry of defence has stated that the earliest it will have an "independent" air force is 2020.

Moreover, in dealing with "external or internal threats," the Strategic Framework sanctions the US to use "diplomatic, economic or military measures, or any other measure, to deter such a threat". Not only does this imply an ongoing presence, the clause could be interpreted as overriding, under certain circumstances, the status of forces' prohibitions on stationing nuclear weapons in Iraq or using the country to launch attacks elsewhere.

For American personnel and the Iraqi people, therefore, US deployments to Iraq are far from coming to an end. Even with no major deterioration in the security situation, and after a substantial withdrawal by 2011 to reinforce the occupation of Afghanistan or conduct other operations, tens of thousands of troops will remain to garrison the major air bases the US has constructed at Balad, Al Asad, Tallil and other locations. While not called "permanent bases," the American military will be using these facilities for years to come.



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John Nagl, a retired US officer who assisted General