

Obama announces plan to continue US military occupation of Iraq

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President Obama formally announced his administration's plans for the continued US military occupation of Iraq on Friday, in remarks delivered at the Camp Lejeune marine base in North Carolina. Far from bringing the war to an end, the plans will maintain present troop levels for one year and ensure a substantial military presence for at least three years, through the end of 2011.

As leaked to the press earlier this week, Obama's plan calls for the withdrawal of all "combat troops" by August 31, 2010, 19 months after his inauguration. This means that the US military presence will continue at present levels through the Iraqi elections scheduled in the fall, ensuring that the occupying forces can maintain a watchful eye over the "democratic" process.

Beginning next year, troops are scheduled to be gradually transferred out of Iraq, leaving a "residual force" of up to 50,000 soldiers after August 2010. Although referred to by the administration as "non-combat troops," this is a verbal sleight-of-hand, as they will continue to be involved in combat activities. Obama said that these soldiers will be involved in "training, equipping, and advising Iraqi Security Forces as long as they remain non-sectarian; conducting targeted counter-terrorism missions; and protecting our ongoing civilian and military efforts within Iraq."

Obama also said that all US soldiers would be out of Iraq by the end of 2011, as required by the Status of Forces Agreement reached by the Bush administration and the Iraqi government in 2008. In a press conference call on Friday, Defense Secretary Robert Gates indicated that this deadline is largely a diplomatic fiction that could be altered. "My own view would be that we should be prepared to have some very modest-sized presence for training and helping them with their new equipment and providing, perhaps, intelligence support and so on," past 2011, he said. "The Iraqis have not said anything about

that at this point, so it remains to be seen whether they will take the initiative."

The central aim in drawing down US forces in Iraq is to free up military resources for a surge in Central and South Asia, a priority of the Obama administration. "America can no longer afford to see Iraq in isolation from other priorities," Obama said. "We face the challenge of refocusing on Afghanistan and Pakistan; of relieving the burden on our military; and of rebuilding our struggling economy."

Last week, Obama announced that he was deploying an additional 17,000 troops to Afghanistan, including 8,000 marines from Camp Lejeune, and the new government has already significantly escalated air attacks on Pakistani soil. Some 15,000 more soldiers will be sent to Afghanistan in the coming months. In his remarks on Friday, Obama said he was also planning a significant increase in the size of the military to facilitate future actions.

Even as he announced the drawdown of "combat" troops over the next 18 months—three months longer than he pledged during his election campaign—Obama made clear his deference to the military. "We will proceed carefully, and I will consult closely with my military commanders on the ground and with the Iraqi government," he said, making clear that changes to the schedule are quite possible. "There will surely be difficult periods and tactical adjustments. But our enemies should be left with no doubt: this plan gives our military the forces and the flexibility they need to support our Iraqi partners, and to succeed."

The Obama administration plan conforms to the demands of the military brass, including General Raymond Odierno, the commanding general in Iraq, and General David Petraeus, head of central command and the architect of the Iraq "surge" implemented in 2007. Both Odierno and Petraeus, along with Defense Secretary

Gates and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Michael Mullen, are holdovers from the Bush administration, ensuring essential continuity with the policy of the previous government.

While some Democrats voiced mild concerns that the 50,000-strong residual force was too high a figure, the plan also won the quick support of major figures in the Republican Party, including former presidential candidate John McCain, who said on Friday that the plan was "reasonable." He commented, "Given the gains in Iraq and the requirements to send additional troops to Afghanistan, together with the significant number of troops that will remain in Iraq and the president's willingness to reassess based on conditions on the ground, I am cautiously optimistic that the plan as laid out by the president can lead to success." House Republican leader John Boehner also endorsed the plan.

The *Wall Street Journal* quoted Gordon Johndroe, the last national security spokesman for Bush, saying that Obama's plan was not in conflict with that of his former boss. "The specific timing is only slightly different but consistent with the goal of helping Iraq become self-sufficient in providing its own security," he said. "This is possibly because of the success of the surge."

According to media reports, Obama telephoned Bush immediately before beginning his speech at Camp Lejeune, though there was no indication as to what the two discussed.

The main concern of the military was to ensure that any partial drawdown was delayed until after the Iraqi elections, and Obama's plan was adapted to meet these concerns. In his remarks on Friday, Gates said that it was critical to "get through this year and all of the elections that will take place" and "have a period of adjustment after those national elections to make sure people are accepting the results."

Obama's speech was replete with obsequious praise for the military, an implicit endorsement of the "surge" policy of the Bush administration, and an acceptance of the lies employed to justify the invasion and occupation of Iraq.

The US military had fought "against tyranny and disorder," he claimed. "You have borne an enormous burden for your fellow citizens, while extending a precious opportunity to the people of Iraq." The military had "served with honor, and succeeded beyond any expectation."

Hammering home his acceptance of the lies used to justify the 2003 invasion, Obama declared to his military audience, "And so I want to be very clear: We sent our

troops to Iraq to do away with Saddam Hussein's regime—and you got the job done. We kept our troops in Iraq to help establish a sovereign government—and you got the job done. And we will leave the Iraqi people with a hard-earned opportunity to live a better life—that is your achievement; that is the prospect that you have made possible."

In a particularly loathsome passage directed at the Iraqi people, Obama declared, "We Americans have offered our most precious resource—our young men and women—to work with you to rebuild what was destroyed by despotism; to root out our common enemies; and to seek peace and prosperity for our children and grandchildren, and for yours."

In fact, the principal force of destruction in Iraq has been the American military itself. More than a million people have died as a result of the war and occupation, and millions more turned into refugees. The economy of the country has been shattered by two wars and a decade-long sanctions regime.

All the lies used to justify this crime—lies facilitated by the Democrats and explicitly endorsed by Obama—were intended to cover for a policy aimed at securing the geo-strategic interests of American imperialism, above all the control of Iraq's oil resources. More than 4,500 US and coalition soldiers have been killed in the process.

Millions of people in the United States voted for Obama because they wanted change in government policy, in particular an end to the war in Iraq. These voters have been disenfranchised, as Obama continues the Iraq occupation and extends military aggression in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In line with his economic program, his military policies are dictated by the interests of the corporate and financial elite.



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