

Hillary Clinton makes crisis visit to Iraq

Bill Van Auken
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In the wake of a series of deadly bombings that have called into question Washington's plans to transfer American troops from Iraq to Afghanistan, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made a crisis trip to Baghdad on Saturday.

In the Iraqi capital, Clinton made public statements assuring the regime of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki of continued US support during the "transition" period that is supposed to see a phased withdrawal of US troops from the occupied country.

Behind the scenes, however, Washington is pressuring Maliki to accept former members of the Baath Party, which ruled the country for more than three decades until the US invasion toppled Saddam Hussein, back into the security forces and the government in a bid to dampen rising sectarian tensions between Sunnis and Shiites.

At the same time, there are mounting indications that the timetable for US troop withdrawals unveiled by President Barack Obama last February may be scrapped in favor of a "conditions-based" plan that would keep tens of thousands of American soldiers in Iraq for many years to come.

The Obama plan, as publicly presented, called for US troops to withdraw from Iraqi cities by June 30 and for "combat troops" to leave the country by August of 2010. A so-called residual force of some 50,000 was to remain in the country until the end of 2011, when all troops were to be withdrawn.

US military commanders last week said that US forces could remain in urban areas beyond the June 30 pullout deadline, if requested by the Iraqi government.

Testifying before a House subcommittee on Friday, US Central Command chief Gen. David Petraeus said that the latest wave of bombings demonstrated that the much touted pacification of Iraq remains "fragile and reversible."

The top US commander in Iraq, Gen. Raymond Odierno, stated that US troops were prepared to "maintain a presence" in Iraqi cities if asked to do so.

Interviewed on CNN Friday, Odierno placed emphasis on the threat of a renewed insurgency in the northern city of Mosul, a center of mounting tensions between the Arab and Kurdish forces.

"The bottom line is we're doing joint assessments with the government of Iraq in all of the areas today," said Odierno. "We'll provide recommendations to the prime minister (Maliki). And he, ultimately, will make that decision whether they stay with combat forces in the city" past the June 30 deadline.

There have been 18 major attacks this month—according to a report released in January by the US Government Accountability Office, attacks across the country are still taking place at the rate of 27 a day—culminating in horrific suicide bombings on Thursday and Friday.

On Thursday, at least 57 people, most of them Iranian pilgrims visiting Shiite holy sites in Iraq, were killed in a suicide bombing in the northeastern province of Diyala. The following day, 84 people were killed in Baghdad and Baquba. In Baghdad, two female suicide bombers slipped past multiple security checkpoints to blow themselves up outside one of the main Shiite shrines, killing some 70 people, many of them again

Iranians.

In words that echoed the triumphalist rhetoric of former Vice President Dick Cheney and former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Clinton blamed the bombings on an isolated band of "rejectionists" and claimed the attacks are a "signal" that they "fear that Iraq is going in the wrong direction."

In reality, there is ample reason to believe that the bombings are a "signal" of deepening sectarian tensions and the threat of a new eruption of the insurgency. Iraqi Sunni insurgent groups recently announced the launching of a new round of attacks, a campaign they have dubbed as "The Good Harvest."

Sunni-Shiite tensions have risen over the past month as the US occupation forces transferred to the Iraqi government the responsibility for the so-called Awakening Councils. These predominantly Sunni militias—often made up of former insurgents—were paid by the US military to serve as security forces in their areas. They were given the job of halting the attacks on US forces and stemming the tide of sectarian violence.

While the Maliki government had pledged to integrate the councils into the security forces and other government agencies, this has not taken place to any large degree. With the government confronting a huge budget shortfall and imposing hiring freezes, it is not likely to happen going forward. Moreover, attempts by the predominantly Shiite Iraqi security forces to disarm these militias have sparked fears that the Sunni population will be defenseless in the event of a new upsurge of sectarian violence.

The *New York Times* reported Sunday on the foundering of an effort by US officials to bring about reconciliation between the Iraqi government and former Baathist officials as a result of intransigence on the part of Maliki and his aides.

The impasse, the newspaper said, "illustrates what could become one of the biggest obstacles to stability in Iraq." The government's attitude, it continued, points to a "hardening sectarianism that threatens to stoke already simmering political tensions and rising anger over a recent spate of bombings aimed at Shiites."

According to the *Times*, Maliki's hardline attitude toward the ex-Baathists is a response to intense criticism from rival Shiite parties, which "have accused him of recently orchestrating a wholesale return of Baathists to bolster his standing with the Sunni minority."

Now Maliki and his allies are invoking the Iraqi 2005 constitution, which they say not only bans the Baath Party, but precludes any negotiations with it. This constitution was rejected in every province where Sunnis are in the majority.

The *Times* quoted Maliki's adviser on reconciliation, Mohammed Salman al-Saady, as saying that the Iraqi government had "fundamental differences" with Washington on "how far to extend reconciliation."

The issue was raised in what was described as a "town-hall style meeting" Clinton held at the US embassy in the heavily fortified Green Zone with an audience that included 100 hand-picked Iraqis. One Iraqi questioner asked Clinton if she supported former Baathists being allowed to "come into the Iraqi society and government and contribute."

Clinton responded that this was an issue “for the Iraqi people to decide”—a claim belied by the behind-the-scenes pressure on the Maliki government to do just that. She went on, however, to stress that “there is nothing more important than to have a united Iraq.”

She continued, “The more united Iraq is, the more you will trust the security force... Now we will be working closely with the Iraqi government and the Iraqi security forces as we withdraw our combat troops. But we need to be sure that all of you are supporting a strong nonsectarian security force.”

Significantly, Clinton spoke only about the withdrawal of “combat troops” and not a total withdrawal of US forces. In a joint press conference with Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari, she said, “The end of the United States’ combat presence in Iraq by 2011 will mark the beginning of a new phase in our country’s relationship.” Under the plan announced by Obama, the summer of 2010 was supposed to see the withdrawal of all combat forces, while the Status of Forces Agreement calls for all US forces to be out of the country by the end of 2011.

Clearly, no one in the US political establishment believes that this is going to happen, in large part because of the inability of American-trained Iraqi security forces to replace US troops in suppressing the population.

Anthony Cordesman, the chief military analyst for the Washington think tank Center for Strategic and International Studies, issued a report last week on the Iraqi security forces entitled “How Soon is Safe? Iraqi Force Development and ‘Conditions-Based’ US Withdrawals.” The thrust of this document is that Washington should be prepared to scrap its withdrawal deadlines, given the state of the Iraqi forces, and that large numbers of US “advisors” will have to remain in the country indefinitely.

“Deadlines like 2011 may prove practical—if all goes well in Iraq—particularly if such deadlines do not preclude keeping a large number of US military advisors,” the report states. “The US ‘occupation’ is so controversial and unpopular that the cost of staying long enough to do every job right could be higher in terms of Iraqi resentment and political backlash than the security benefits would be worth. Nevertheless, both sides need to be realistic about the speed with which they can act.”

The document goes on to cite various loopholes in the Status of Forces Agreement that would allow the continuation of the US occupation. These include a clause allowing the US to “take appropriate measures including diplomatic, economic and military measures” to deter a threat to Iraqi “sovereignty.” Another article in the agreement calls for the two governments to “continue close cooperation in strengthening military and security institutions... including, as may be mutually agreed upon, cooperation in training, equipping and arming the Iraqi security forces.”

Cordesman’s report describes the Iraqi Army as plagued by “serious ethnic and sectarian divisions and tensions” and warns that the government’s failure to incorporate the Sunni militiamen formerly paid by the US occupation force “could lead to a serious confrontation between the Awakening movement and the GOI (Government of Iraq).”

Citing the performance of Iraqi security forces in battles in Basra, Sadr City and Diyala, the report concludes that the loyalty of troops to the central government is questionable and that they are not able to act on their own without substantial US support.

As for the Shia-dominated police, he quotes a US officer’s description of some of these units: “Toward their fellow Shia, they behave like the mafia; towards Sunnis, they behave like the Ku Klux Klan.”

The dependence of Iraqi forces on US military support is in part a question of design, as Washington has denied them access to heavy weapons, combat aircraft and other military hardware which the US forces employ regularly against the Iraqi resistance.

“Half a decade after the fall of Saddam, there is still no meaningful transparency regarding the future structure of the Iraqi military forces and the role the US will play in making Iraq strong enough to defend its own sovereignty,” the report states.

Clearly, Washington’s aim is to keep Iraqi forces weak enough so that the country’s government remains dependent upon US support for its survival. By maintaining its military domination over the country, the US aims to secure effective control over Iraq’s vast oil reserves.

However, the plan initiated under the Bush administration and continued under Obama calls for this domination to be secured with substantially fewer US troops and reliance on Iraqi puppet forces. The Obama administration’s intention to escalate the US military intervention in Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan is predicated on its ability to transfer a major portion of the 140,000 US soldiers and Marines now occupying Iraq to US imperialism’s Central Asian front.

The back-to-back visits to Baghdad by President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton are indicative of the crisis plaguing this planned redeployment. While both Democrats and Republicans had convinced themselves of the success of the military “surge” undertaken under the Bush administration, this supposed victory is proving illusory.

The death and destruction unleashed upon Iraq by the US invasion and occupation have not laid the basis for a stable US client regime. While resistance could be quelled, at least temporarily, through the killing of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and the displacement of millions more, the US military campaign has left Iraqi society shattered, without any real economy and with every basic institution and essential service unviable. Moreover, Washington’s divide-and-conquer strategy and its encouragement of ethnic-based politics have left the country divided by intense sectarian tensions that threaten to erupt into civil war.

To achieve its strategic aims, Washington will be compelled to continue its occupation of Iraq indefinitely, keeping tens of thousands of troops there even as the Obama administration seeks to double the number of troops fighting in Afghanistan. Thus, a government elected in large measure because of the hostility of the American people to the Bush administration’s war policy is preparing a major escalation of military violence.



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