

# US Army chief sees Iraq, Afghanistan occupations continuing for a decade

**Bill Van Auken****29 May 2009**

The chief of staff of the US Army, Gen. George Casey, said this week that the American military is preparing to continue its interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan for at least another decade.

In an invitation-only interview Tuesday with selected reporters and think tank representatives, Casey said that the protracted US occupation of the two countries was necessary in order to meet a “sustained US commitment to fighting extremism and terrorism in the Middle East,” the Associated Press reported.

Casey’s remarks came amid mounting signs that the US attempts to pacify Iraq are coming unraveled, even as the Obama administration is carrying out new deployments that will double the number of troops in Afghanistan to 68,000.

Two more US military personnel were killed this week, bringing the death toll in May to the highest level since September of last year. The total number of US troops killed since the Bush administration launched the invasion of Iraq in March 2003 has risen to 4,302.

Meanwhile, for Iraqis, last month was the bloodiest in over a year, with more than 500 killed in a series of suicide bombings and sectarian killings.

The latest attack claimed the lives of an American soldier and four Iraqi civilians Wednesday, when a roadside bomb was detonated as an American convoy drove through Abu Ghraib, the western district of Baghdad that was home to the US detention center where Iraqis were subjected to systematic torture and abuse. The facility has since been turned over the Iraqi security forces to run.

The Pentagon also released the name of another member of the US military killed on Tuesday. Navy Cmdr. Duane Wolfe, 54, the head of the Army Corps of Engineers operations in Iraq’s Anbar province, was killed with two other individuals when a bomb exploded under his vehicle near the city of Fallujah.

Meanwhile, there are growing indications that one of the principal props of the so-called surge launched by the Bush administration in 2007 is beginning to crumble. The “Awakening Movement,” or *Sahwa*, which consisted of largely Sunni militias, many drawn from former insurgents, was employed as a neighborhood security force, with members paid as much \$300 a month by the US military.

Last fall, Washington turned over responsibility for the militias to the predominantly Shiite Iraqi government, which has largely halted payments and reneged on its pledge to employ some 20

percent of the militiamen in the security forces and other government agencies.

Moreover, Awakening Movement leaders have been targeted for arrest, and there have been clashes between their members and the security forces. On Thursday, the Iraqi army arrested another leader of one of the militia groups at his home in Baquba, northeast of Baghdad.

“The Americans made the *Sahwa* militias to fight Al Qaeda, then they abandoned them,” another Awakening leader, Sheik Ali Hatem Sulaiman, told *USA Today*. “The heads of *Sahwa* are beginning to feel it would have been better to stay with Al Qaeda.”

According to the AP, Casey stressed that his remarks Tuesday about US troops continuing to occupy Iraq and Afghanistan for another 10 years “were not meant to conflict with Obama administration policies.”

But clearly the preparations that the Army’s top officer is discussing make a mockery of the so-called withdrawal plan put forward by the White House. Under the timetable announced by President Obama in February, US “combat troops” are supposed to leave Iraq by August of next year, with all US military forces out of the country by the end of 2011.

This hardly comes as a surprise. Top military commanders have been hinting for months that conditions on the ground in Iraq may force a scrapping of the timetable.

Already, US commanders have made it clear that the supposed deadline of June 30 for the withdrawal of US troops from Iraqi cities is more illusory than real. American units will continue combat operations in the northern city of Mosul, where simmering conflicts between Arabs and Kurds threaten to erupt into a new phase of civil war.

Thousands of troops will continue operating in Baghdad as well as in Diyala province north of the capital. In other areas where troops are pulled back to bases, they will continue carrying out raids on Iraqi cities, while formally maintaining that such attacks must be approved by the Iraqi regime.

As for the second phase, the withdrawal of “combat troops” in August 2010, Pentagon officials have indicated that they will merely reclassify units currently listed as combat troops, calling them support or training units in order to maintain a substantial occupation force within the country.

Meanwhile, Adm. Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, called into question the 2011 final withdrawal deadline during an interview on the ABC News program “This Week” last

Sunday. “We’ll have to see,” said Mullen. “The next 12 to 18 months are really critical in that regard.”

Mullen went on to stress that Washington was forging a “long-term relationship” with Iraq and that “part of that is the possibility that forces could remain there longer—that’s up to the Iraqi people and the Iraqi government.”

The withdrawal dates are written into the status of forces agreement signed by Washington and Baghdad. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has repeatedly insisted that these deadlines will be enforced. This is believed to be largely for public consumption in Iraq, however, where the population is overwhelmingly opposed to the US occupation. Behind the scenes, US and Iraqi officials are agreeing to override the timetable and keep American forces in place.

Jane Arraf of the *Christian Science Monitor* reported last week that, as part of the attempt to maintain the fiction that the deadline for withdrawing from Iraqi cities is being observed, US occupation commanders and the Iraqi regime agreed to re-draw the map of Baghdad. It declared that Base Falcon in the Rasheed district of Baghdad was outside the city limits so that 3,000 US troops deployed there can continue patrolling the tense southern part of the capital.

While openly declaring that his “reality scenario” is “10 Army and Marine units”—more than 50,000 troops—“deployed for a decade in Iraq and Afghanistan,” Casey expressed concern that the military would not be able “to draw down in Iraq close to the schedule we have set.”

“It would be very difficult to sustain the current levels of commitment here for very much longer,” the general said, referring to the 139,000 American soldiers and Marines now deployed in Iraq.

With the Obama administration escalating the war in Afghanistan—Casey warned that “there’s going to be a big fight in the south”—and extending the intervention into Pakistan, the strain on the US military has never been greater. The Army chief said that with the buildup in Afghanistan, the military now has 10,000 more troops deployed in the two wars than it did under the Bush administration.

An attempt to continue deployments at current levels, with back-to-back troop deployments, he warned would “bring the Army to its knees.”

Among the starker indications of the immense toll that nearly eight years of war and occupation in Afghanistan and more than six in Iraq are taking on the US military is a record suicide rate in the Army—more than double what it was in 2004—and the growing incidence of mental problems, with more than 13,000 cases of post-traumatic stress disorder being diagnosed by Army doctors last year. (See “US: Army base ordered on stand-down after multiple suicides”)

In remarks delivered earlier this month, Casey pointed to the same stress upon the military, stating that there was a “thin red line,” which, if it were crossed, would “break” the Army. “You can fix this two ways,” he said, “increase the forces, or decrease the need.”

It is evident that the need for cannon fodder will not decrease as Washington escalates its military interventions. Increasing the

forces in a substantial way calls into question the viability of the “volunteer” military and raises the prospects of the reinstitution of military conscription.

What is perhaps most remarkable about Casey’s matter-of-fact declaration that the US will be waging colonial-style warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan for at least another 10 years—and, as he indicated, carrying out new wars elsewhere on the planet—is its failure to arouse any serious coverage in the “mainstream” media, much less any hint of protest from within the political establishment.

While Barack Obama owes his election to the presidency in large part to the deep-going antiwar sentiments in the American population, the move by his administration to escalate US militarism and increase the number of American troops sent into battle enjoys the support of America’s ruling elite and both of its major parties.

The consensus behind the continuation and escalation of the US wars of aggression found unmistakable expression in the approval by an overwhelming 86-3 vote in the US Senate of more than \$91 billion to continue funding the two wars through September.

The absence of opposition raises the obvious question of why there was at least the pretense of dissent from the Bush administration’s war policy within the Democratic Party. Clearly, it was not a matter of opposition to wars of aggression or imperialist foreign policy. The Democrats no less than the Republicans remain committed to achieving the original aims of the two wars: countering American capitalism’s economic decline by using military means to assert US hegemony over geopolitically vital, oil-rich regions of the planet.

What differences that existed were largely a matter of tactics, not strategy; style and not substance.

While the ruling establishment uses the Obama administration to create an air of political consensus for American militarism within official Washington, the hostility to these wars is only deepening among broad masses of working people. More and more, this opposition will come together with struggles against the escalating attacks on jobs and living standards, creating the conditions for social and political explosions in the US itself.



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