

US opposes Iraqi popular vote on troop withdrawal

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An Iraqi national referendum on last year's security pact with the US is currently scheduled to take place on July 30. According to Iraqi law, if voters reject the pact, which calls for the US to remove all troops by December 31, 2011, Washington would have to remove its military 17 months sooner—by July 30 of 2010. Should the vote be held as scheduled, it is a virtual certainty that the Iraqi masses will repudiate the pact.

Washington, of course, has no intention of obeying any popular referendum. Yet it wishes to avoid the political embarrassment of a broad repudiation of its occupation of the oil-rich country. "American diplomats are quietly lobbying the government not to hold the referendum," the *New York Times* notes. The US has long justified its invasion and occupation of Iraq—which has resulted in the deaths of well over 1 million Iraqis and made refugees out of millions more—as a selfless exercise in building "democracy."

A large majority of Iraq's parliament approved the security pact, the Status of Forces Agreement, with the US last year, but attenuated it with additional legislation, including a measure that stipulated a national referendum be held on the agreement. The measure, what the *Times* calls a "little remarked upon, but potent poison pill," was added as a means of appeasing massive popular hatred of the US occupation.

So far, American efforts to stop or delay the vote have been met with limited results. "Perhaps in deference to American concerns," the *Times* speculates, the Iraqi cabinet "issued a statement on Tuesday saying that it wished to delay the vote for six months so that it could be held at the same time as the national elections in January 'in order to save money and time.'" A *Wall Street Journal* account was more categorical, asserting that the vote has already been delayed, and that "it is possible that a vote on the referendum won't be held at all."

To legally change the scheduled vote, however, requires a lengthy parliamentary process, and top Iraqi lawmakers told the *Times* they believe this an unlikely scenario. A member of the ruling Dawa Party, a Shiite formation, said that "the date was an essential part of the security agreement." The speaker of parliament, Ayad al-Sammarai, of the Sunni Iraqi Islamic Party, said "no one can say they don't want a referendum, it is a law."

Iraq's cabinet on Tuesday appropriated \$99 million for the referendum, and parliament is expected to pass additional legislation needed to organize the referendum.

Iraqi lawmakers fear the popular reaction should they scuttle the vote. "Nobody wants to say 'yes, we want the security agreement,'" Ghassan al-Attiya, director of the US-funded Iraq Foundation for Democracy and Development in London, told the *Times*. "This is an election year for Iraq; no one wants to appear that he is appeasing the Americans. Anti-Americanism is popular now in Iraq."

Most of the Sunni political groups will campaign for a no vote on the pact, as will the Shiite Sadrist movement of Moktada al-Sadr. As for Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, he is "unlikely to want to speak up in favor of the security agreement for fear that his opponents will use it against him," the *Times* writes. Maliki will work with the US behind the scenes to push the plebiscite back.

Top US military officials are openly contemptuous of the Iraqis' right to vote on the American occupation, misnamed "Operation Iraqi Freedom," just as they oppose the Iraqis' right to view the evidence of torture committed by US military personnel on Iraqi prisoners—men, women, and children.

Indeed, President Barack Obama's decision to fight the court-ordered release of sealed photographic evidence of US military personnel torturing Iraqi prisoners was based in part on its potential impact on the referendum, should it be held.

General David Petraeus, top commander of US troops in the Middle East and Central Asia, on May 28 made a filing with the Second Circuit Court of Appeals warning that should the photos be released, “pressure will mount on the prime minister to allow for a national referendum on the Security Agreement and the Strategic Framework Agreement.” General Raymond Odierno, US commander in Iraq, also submitted a filing, writing that “the release of the photos may incite the Iraqi public and cause the referendum to be defeated.”

Prime Minister Maliki made similar, private warnings to Obama over the photos’ release. In his court filing, Odierno said that “top Iraqi officials” warned him that release of the photos could cause an increase in resistance among “opposition elements” against a “government that has aligned itself with the country that committed this abuse.” A US military official told McClatchey Newspapers that when Maliki learned that Obama would release the photos “he went pale in the face.” Maliki warned the official that Iraq would erupt in violence if the photos were made public and that Iraqis would demand a referendum on the US security pact. “Baghdad will burn,” Maliki reportedly told the military official.

Highlighting the potential for the eruption of violence in Iraq, the leader of the Iraqi parliament’s largest Sunni faction, the Accordance Front, was assassinated outside of a mosque on Friday. Harith al-Obeidi and his faction voiced opposition to the US occupation. On Wednesday, a car bomb blew up in Bathaa in predominantly Shiite southeastern Iraq, killing 32. May also marked the bloodiest month for US soldiers in Iraq in almost one year, with 28 dying.



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