

Iraqi prime minister: US forces can stay after 2011

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The most noteworthy aspect of the visit by Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to Washington last week was the unscripted remark he made on July 23 while addressing the foreign policy thinktank, the United States Institute for Peace (USIP).

In answer to a question concerning the December 31, 2011 expiry of the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA)—the legal basis for American troops being on Iraqi soil—Maliki made clear the date was open to extension.

He stated: “Pursuant to the agreement, in 2011, the military presence of the Americans will end in Iraq. Nevertheless, if the Iraqi forces required further training and further support, we shall examine this then at that time, based on the needs of Iraq ... the nature of that relationship as well as the functions and the amount of forces will be then discussed and re-examined again.”

Maliki’s statement was a public admission of what was worked out during the protracted negotiations last year between the Bush White House—with the support of president-elect Obama—and the various factions that make up the Iraqi government. The so-called “deadline” for the withdrawal of all American forces was not worth the paper it was written on.

Alongside the SOFA document, a Strategic Framework Agreement was also signed, committing the US and Iraq to a “long term relationship in economic, diplomatic, cultural and security fields”. The key element of the security cooperation was the provision of “training and support” to the Iraqi military by American forces—the exact formulation used last week by Maliki.

It is worth recalling the Iraqi defence ministry’s assessment in November 2008 regarding its planned air force. The ministry determined that it would be dependent on direct US assistance and logistics until at least 2020. John Nagl, a former US officer who took part in drafting

the tactics of the US surge in Iraq, told the *Washington Post* at the time: “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.”

Asked on Tuesday whether the Iraqi Air Force could operate independently after 2011, the US commander in Iraq, General Ray Odierno, gave his own blunt answer. “Right now. No,” he said.

Addressing a joint press conference with Maliki on July 22, Barack Obama declared: “As I said before, we seek no bases in Iraq, nor do we make any claim on Iraq’s territory or resources.” He did so in the knowledge there was no need. Obama is confident that the government in Baghdad, which is dependent on Washington’s backing, will “ask” the US military to stay.

The main facilities that have been repaired and expanded during the six-and-a-half year US occupation are a number of strategic air bases: the so-called “Super Base” at Balad to the north of Baghdad; Ali (formerly Tallil) to the south of the capital; Al Asad in western Anbar province; and Baghdad Airport itself.

From these sites, US air power—kept in the country on the grounds of the weakness of the Iraqi Air Force—can be projected throughout the Middle East and much of Africa and Central Asia, as well as against Iraqi targets at any time. Post-2011, the Strategic Framework Agreement calls for the US to respond to purported “external or internal threats” to Iraq, i.e. challenges to the survival of a pro-US client state, using “diplomatic, economic or military measures, or any other measure, to deter such a threat”.

Maintaining an American presence at these air bases will require only a fraction of the 130,000 troops still occupying Iraq. Indeed, the original planning by the Bush administration, spelt out in 2002 by then assistant defense secretary Paul Wolfowitz, was that there would only be

40,000 to 60,000 troops in the country within six months of an invasion.

Instead, the US military confronted unexpected and widespread resistance, which it has still not been completely suppressed despite years of killings, intimidation and devastation. Even after the June 30 “withdrawal” from Iraqi cities, American troops have been called upon to once again assist Iraqi government forces in Mosul, where the insurgency is still active. This month, three US soldiers were killed in a rocket attack on the American base at the airport in the southern city of Basra.

The Obama administration hopes the situation stabilises sufficiently to reduce US troop numbers in Iraq to 50,000 by August 2010, freeing up forces for the escalating war in Afghanistan, while still leaving sufficient personnel to protect and service the bases. The clear intention of the White House, on behalf of the American ruling elite as a whole, is to realise the predatory and criminal objectives behind the 2003 invasion and ensuing carnage.

Long-term bases to consolidate US military hegemony in the Middle East were just one of these objectives. Another key aim was domination over Iraq’s reserves of oil and gas: among the largest in the world. Obama does not have to “claim” these resources on behalf of American and other global energy transnationals. Maliki’s government has “invited” them to make major investments.

As well as meetings with Obama and key administration members, Maliki held talks with business figures and gave an address to the US Chamber of Commerce on July 24. He announced a “US-Iraq Business and Investment Summit”, hosted by the Chamber from October 20 to 21. Its purpose will be to attempt to convince investors that Iraq is a safe business environment. Maliki pledged that the right of foreign companies to extract profits would be “protected by binding legislation”.

However, the current situation in Iraq remains tenuous, threatening prospects of substantial investment and any substantial reduction in US troop numbers. There are rapidly escalating tensions between Maliki’s central government and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) that rules northern Iraq as an autonomous state. There are also barely suppressed antagonisms between the rival Shiite and Sunni Arab factions who fought a murderous civil war during 2006 and 2007 that displaced some four million people.

The most explosive issue, however, is the social one. Millions of Iraqis—of all ethnic backgrounds and religious

persuasions—confront unemployment, a lack of basic services, shortages of electricity and water, and grinding poverty.

The United Nations Human Settlements Program estimated this month that the country is short 1.5 million housing units, half the population live in “slum-like conditions” and the situation will worsen in coming years. There is also a shortage of 4,000 schools and the hospital system still struggles to function due to a lack of staff, beds and equipment.

The Iraqi security forces created by the US occupation will be used to suppress any opposition to these appalling conditions. The character of the security apparatus is underscored by the prison system—the true heir of Abu Ghraib. Fawziya al-Jashami, a representative of the Iraqi Human Rights Committee, told *Azzaman* last month after a fact-finding mission to a detention centre in the southern province of Babil that she “saw types of torture which are so vicious and horrific that I cannot describe them as a woman.... Every inmate has about 30 square centimetres of space because of overcrowding”.

US troops were sent to Iraq on the basis of threadbare lies that it was a war to prevent “weapons of mass destruction” being handed over by the Hussein regime to Al Qaeda. Over 4,300 American soldiers have died and hundreds of thousands have suffered physical or mental injuries that will afflict them for life.

Obama will keep troops in Iraq for years to come based on another lie: that their presence is at the invitation of, and to defend, a “democratic” government. The truth is they are protecting the strategic and economic interests of the American imperialism, represented locally by Maliki and whoever succeeds him, against the social and democratic aspirations of the Iraqi working class and rural poor.



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