

Top general reveals

US has ‘Plan B’ to keep combat troops in Iraq after August

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25 February 2010

In an apparent effort to prepare US and Iraqi public opinion for a change in policy, the top US commander in Baghdad announced Monday that he had briefed the Pentagon on plans to keep combat troops in Iraq after an upcoming August 31 deadline for their withdrawal.

Under terms of a Status of Forces Agreement negotiated between the Bush administration and the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, and subsequently embraced by the Obama administration, all US combat troops are to be out of Iraq by the end of August, leaving 50,000 training and support troops, who are to be removed by the end of 2011.

Speaking to reporters at the Pentagon, Army Gen. Raymond Odierno said that the drawdown of US troops from Iraq was ahead of schedule, with 96,000 soldiers currently there compared to the 115,000 troops initially planned. But he said uncertainty surrounding the March 7 parliamentary elections and the post-election process of forming a government could lead to a delay in withdrawals, currently set at about 10,000 soldiers per month.

“I have contingency plans that I’ve briefed to the chain of command this week that we could execute if we run into problems,” Gen. Odierno said. “We’re prepared to execute those.” He said that events in the spring would determine whether the pace of withdrawals could be sustained, particularly any outbreak of violence in the aftermath of the elections.

Earlier in his Washington trip, Odierno had charged that Iran was directly intervening in the Iraqi elections through supporters like Ali Faisal al-Lami, head of a special election panel, and his ally Ahmad Chalabi,

who have spearheaded the exclusion of secular and Sunni Arab candidates from the vote. One of the largest Sunni parties has announced its boycott of the election because its top leaders were barred from running.

It is unlikely that any of the main party groupings will win a majority of seats in parliament on March 7. The outlook is for a protracted period of political infighting between rival Shi’ite, Sunni and Kurdish-based parties, leading ultimately to the formation of a more-or-less stable coalition government. This process took six months after the last election, so a repetition would coincide almost exactly with the period of the drawdown of US combat troops.

In a speech to the Council on Foreign Relations last week, Christopher Hill, US ambassador to Iraq, said, “How long this is going to take, this government formation, that is really the rub,” adding, “There’s a good reason why people are worried.”

The immediate target of these statements was in Iraq, where Washington has exerted enormous pressure on the Maliki regime over the exclusion of the Sunni candidates. The concern of the Pentagon and the Obama administration is that the flagrantly sectarian character of the election rulings could provoke a new outbreak of violent resistance to the US occupiers and the puppet government in Baghdad.

This concern was echoed in the pages of the *New York Times* Wednesday in an op-ed column by Thomas Ricks, the former Pentagon correspondent for the *Washington Post* who has written two books about the US military performance in Iraq. He noted that a major factor in the US “surge” in Iraq carried out in 2007-2008 was that “Gen. David Petraeus...effectively put the Sunni insurgency on the American payroll.”

Now, a new outbreak of civil war or a military coup in Baghdad was feared, he said.

Ricks noted that the withdrawal plan had originally been drafted with the assumption that Iraqi elections would be held in late 2009 or January 2010, leaving eight months after the vote to organize the removal of combat troops. The election was pushed back several months by internal Iraqi political conflicts, but the withdrawal timetable remains unaltered.

Ricks noted, in passing, that the government's current withdrawal plan provides for a “‘residual force’ of unspecified size” to remain in Iraq indefinitely.

He concluded: “President Obama may find himself later this year considering whether once again to break his campaign promises about ending the war, and to offer to keep tens of thousands of troops in Iraq for several more years. Surprisingly, that probably is the best course for him, and for Iraqi leaders, to pursue.”

A similar concern was expressed February 23 by Stratfor Global Intelligence, which has close ties to the US national-security apparatus. It cited “mounting concerns over whether the already-delayed rapid drawdown of US troops now slated to begin in mid-May is realistic.”

Stratfor noted that Odierno’s appearance at the Pentagon was carefully choreographed by the Obama administration. Odierno “came to Washington publicize the plan: He did not do this without direction, authorization and coordination with the White House.”

The report added that regional rather than purely Iraqi issues were at stake: “The Iraq withdrawal is about more than just extricating itself from Iraq. It is also about lightening the burden on US ground combat forces at a time when some 30,000 additional troops are being sent to Afghanistan.” And besides Afghanistan, “as the confrontation with Iran over its nuclear program appears to be reaching a decision point, Iran may decide to use its assets in Iraq to retaliate against the United States.”

The strategy of American imperialism in the broader region has been based for several years on drawing down the US force in Iraq to make troops available both for escalation of the war in Afghanistan—which Obama ultimately authorized in December—and for some unspecified actions against Iran, which, as Stratfor points out, is “reaching a decision point.”

The White House and Pentagon are concerned that as the conflicts intensify among the Iraqi stooges it installed in power in Baghdad, the timetable for a simultaneous drawdown from Iraq and buildup in Afghanistan could be disrupted, putting at risk the larger enterprise of establishing American domination throughout the region.



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