

US consolidates occupation of Iraq

Peter Symonds
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As the Obama administration escalates its war in Afghanistan, Iraq is cautiously being declared a success. The top American commander in Iraq, General Raymond Odierno, declared last Friday that the country had held “a legitimate and credible election”, its security forces had improved and plans were “on track” for the withdrawal of all US combat troops from Iraq by September 1.

Speaking at the West Point military academy late last month, President Obama was even more upbeat, declaring that as US troops depart, “a strong American civilian presence will help Iraqis forge political and economic progress” towards establishing “a democratic Iraq that is sovereign and stable and self-reliant”.

The reality is entirely different. Even after the September deadline, the US military will maintain a huge military presence of 50,000 troops, ostensibly in “non-combat” and “training” roles, to prop up a puppet regime in Baghdad, which, three months after the national election, is yet to be formed. While the character of the American occupation of Iraq is changing, its underlying purpose—to maintain the country firmly under US domination—remains the same.

In his comments last Friday, General Odierno declared that the “drawdown” was ahead of schedule—600,000 containers of gear and 18,000 vehicles moved out; and the number of bases down from 500 last year to 126 and set to decline to 94 by September 1. What is actually underway, however, is not a withdrawal, but a vast consolidation in preparation for the long-term occupation of the country by US forces.

The *Stars and Stripes* newspaper noted in an article on June 1 that the ratification of the US-Iraq security

agreement in November 2008 governing the drawdown was followed by a massive expansion of base construction work. “In all, the military finished \$496 million in base construction projects during 2009, the highest annual figure since the war began and nearly a quarter of the \$2.1 billion spent on American bases in Iraq since 2004. An additional \$323 million worth of projects are set to be completed this year.”

While the number of US bases may be declining, the Pentagon is establishing what are known as “enduring presence posts”—including four major bases: Joint Base Balad in the north, Camp Adder in southern Iraq, Al-Asad Air Base in the west and the Victory Base Complex around Baghdad International Airport. These are sprawling fortified facilities—Balad alone currently houses more than 20,000 troops. In addition to the 50,000 troops that will remain, there will be up to 65,000 contractors after September 1.

Under the 2008 agreement, the US military handed over internal security functions to Iraqi forces last year, but, under the guise of “training” and “support”, retains tighter supervision of the army and police. Moreover the Iraqi government can always “request” US troop assistance in mounting operations. As Odierno explained in a letter to US personnel on June 1, even after all US combat troops leave, “we will continue to conduct partnered counter-terrorism operations and provide combat enablers to help the Iraqi Security Forces maintain pressure on the extremist networks.”

The 2008 agreement sets December 31, 2011 as the deadline for all US troops to quit Iraq, but the construction of huge new US bases indicates a long-term US military presence under a Strategic Framework Agreement that is yet to be negotiated. As *Stars and Stripes* pointed out, “the nascent condition of the Iraqi

Air Force... could lead the Iraqi government to request that a US training force remain in the country beyond 2011, most likely at Balad.”

Accompanying the troop drawdown is a buildup of civilian operations centred on the US embassy in Baghdad. The new embassy, situated in the fortified Green Zone, is the largest and most expensive in the world. Opened in January 2009, the complex includes 21 buildings, occupies 0.4 square kilometres and houses 1,000 regular employees as well as up to 3,000 additional staff. The embassy’s No 2 diplomat Cameron Munter told the *Washington Post* last month: “Our commitment will not be on the scale of numbers and money that the military has. But it will be extraordinarily substantial.”

The *Post* also touched on certain sensitive projects that would not be handed over to embassy staff, including “the collection of intelligence, initiatives to counter what the military calls ‘malign Iranian influence’, and the integration of tens of thousands of former insurgents the military turned into Sunni paramilitary groups.” In other words, the US military will remain actively involved in monitoring and manipulating the sectarian divisions that Washington has exploited since the 2003 invasion to assert its control.

The “ending” of the insurgency, trumpeted by the Pentagon and White House, has involved the ruthless suppression of opposition to the US occupation, resulting in the deaths of more than a million Iraqis, another two million driven into exile, and tens of thousands detained and tortured. Iraqi “democracy” rests on a police state apparatus developed and honed by the US military. The “legitimate and credible” election in March was only open to those parties and politicians that accepted the occupation.

Seven years of war has had a devastating impact on the Iraqi people. Unemployment and underemployment remain high. According to last month’s Brookings Iraq Index, as of last year, only 20 percent of the population had access to proper sanitation, 45 percent to clean water, 50 percent to more than 12 hours a day of electricity, 50 percent to adequate housing and 30

percent to health services. A 2007 World Bank survey found that 23 percent of people were living in poverty on less than \$US2.20 a day.

The criminal US invasion of Iraq was not aimed at helping the Iraqi people. Rather, its purpose was to subjugate the country in order to establish control over its vast energy reserves and to transform it into a base for wider American strategic objectives in the Middle East and Central Asia. Having bloodily suppressed resistance in Iraq, the Obama administration is pulling its troops out in order to expand its neo-colonial war in Afghanistan and for new military aggression in other parts of the globe.

Being left behind is an extensive American civilian and military apparatus that will continue to control the levers of power in Baghdad, bully the Iraqi government into line on matters concerning US interests, keep a watchful eye on the country’s festering sectarian tensions and leave the door open to a rapid return of US troops.

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