

Obama hails Iraq war in “withdrawal” speech

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3 August 2010

In a speech to a disabled veterans group in Atlanta Monday, President Barack Obama claimed credit for winding down the US war in Iraq, even as tens of thousands of troops remain there, and his administration continues to escalate the war in Afghanistan.

The speech appeared calculated to divert rising opposition to the Afghanistan war, particularly in the wake of the WikiLeaks disclosure of tens of thousands of classified battlefield reports, exposing an unrelenting and savage assault on the country’s civilian population.

Obama touted the reduction of US troop strength in Iraq—now down to some 65,000 from a high of 144,000—and vowed that the target of pulling out all but 50,000 troops by the end of this month would be met, as well as the withdrawal of all US military forces by the end of 2011.

“As a candidate for president, I pledged to bring the war in Iraq to a responsible end,” Obama told the veterans audience. The “responsible end” formulation was employed by Obama as a clear signal to the US ruling elite that his antiwar rhetoric in the presidential campaign would be quickly discarded once the Democrat entered the White House and assumed the role of commander in chief for US imperialism.

Obama continued: “Shortly after taking office, I announced our new strategy for Iraq and for a transition to full Iraqi responsibility. And I made it clear that by August 31, 2010 America’s combat mission in Iraq would end. And that is exactly what we are doing—as promised, on schedule.”

These targets were, in fact, set by Obama’s predecessor, George W. Bush, in a 2008 status of forces agreement negotiated with the US-backed regime in Baghdad. The incoming Democratic president quickly jettisoned a pledge he had made to pull out all US troops more rapidly, conforming to the original schedule, even as he kept at their posts all of the top civilian and military officials picked by Bush to run the war.

In his speech, Obama extolled the feats of the US military in overrunning Iraq and waging a one-sided war against its civilian population.

“They took to the skies and sped across the deserts in the initial charge into Baghdad,” he declared. “When the invasion gave way to insurgency, our troops persevered, block by block, city by city, from Baghdad to Fallujah,” he continued.

One would never know from this lyrical description that the US had waged a criminal war of aggression that has cost the lives of over a million Iraqi men, women and children and left an entire country in ruins.

Nor, for that matter, would one guess from his words that the speaker was a candidate who won the Democratic nomination less

than two years ago by proclaiming that the Iraq war “should never have been authorized and never been waged.” One could be excused for thinking instead that it was George W. Bush.

In extolling the supposed withdrawal from Iraq, Obama hailed the military for “moving out millions of pieces of equipment in one of the largest logistics operations that we’ve seen in decades” and bringing “90,000 of our troops home from Iraq since I took office.”

He failed to add, however, that these millions of pieces of military hardware and tens of thousands of troops aren’t being brought home, but are instead being shipped to Afghanistan. While reducing the US troop level in Iraq by two thirds, the Obama administration has tripled the size of US forces in Afghanistan, while spreading the war across the border into Pakistan.

He defended the US war in Afghanistan, however, using the same pretext as his predecessor, claiming that US forces are there to fight al Qaeda and foil terrorist attacks. This, even as US and military and intelligence officials acknowledge that there are less than 100 al Qaeda members in the entire country.

In reality, Obama has appropriated the Bush administration’s rhetoric even as it pursues the same strategic goals laid out at the beginning of the century—the assertion of US hegemony over the geostrategically vital and oil-rich regions of Central Asia and the Persian Gulf by means of military aggression. The continued pursuit of this policy, which enjoys the support of decisive layers of America’s ruling financial elite, ensures the continuous escalation of war in both regions and beyond.

The claim that all US “combat troops” will be out of Iraq by August 31 is fraudulent. Units previously classified as “combat” troops are merely being relabeled as “advice and assist” brigades, with their mission supposedly restricted to training and “advising” the Iraqi security forces.

US military commanders, however, have made it clear that the remaining troops will continue to carry out “counterterrorism” operations, which are combat missions, and will be prepared to directly intervene against any major challenge to US domination of the oil-rich country.

“I would say that 50,000 troops on the ground is still a significant capability,” Maj. Gen. Stephen Lanza, a US military spokesman, told the media. “There is still a lot we can do with the capability we have, and we will still have influence here,” he added in a considerable understatement.

There is little reason to believe that the remaining US troops will be withdrawn from Iraq by the end of 2011. Senior military officers have repeatedly stressed that US forces will remain in the country for many years to come, and Washington has continued to

build up and retain control of giant military bases, such as those at Balad, Al Asad and Tallil.

After seven years of war, costing the US more than \$700 billion and the lives of at least 4,400 troops—and an estimated one million Iraqis—the American occupation will continue.

There is no plan to have a self-sufficient Iraqi military by 2011. The American military will remain in strategic control, with the US Air Force controlling Iraq's skies, the US Navy its Persian Gulf coastline and US Army tanks and artillery backing under-equipped Iraqi units.

For its part, the US State Department is reportedly preparing to field its own private army of "security contractors," i.e., private mercenaries. As McClatchy Newspapers reported, the top US commander in Iraq, Gen. Raymond Odierno flew back to Washington last week to discuss plans for deploying this force. The news service reported that the State Department has already asked the Pentagon for "Black Hawk helicopters; 50 mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicles; fuel trucks; high-tech surveillance systems; and other military gear."

The State Department was a major employer of Blackwater mercenaries, whose bloody actions in Iraq earned the hatred of the local population.

According to McClatchy, the bipartisan legislative Commission on Wartime Contracting issued a report last month that said "the number of State Department security contractors would more than double, from 2,700 to between 6,000 and 7,000, under current plans."

McClatchy quoted the State Department's Under-secretary Patrick Kennedy defending the use of private contractors, insisting that it was the only feasible way to assemble such a paramilitary force. "This is the kind of surge activity that it seems very, very logical to use contractors for," he said.

In his speech Monday, Obama touted the "progress" achieved by the seven-year-old US war in occupation in Iraq—which as a candidate he had ostensibly opposed—claiming that "violence in Iraq continues to be near the lowest it's been in years."

His administration and the Pentagon know this statement is a barefaced lie. Only days earlier, the Iraqi government issued a report showing that Iraqi casualties for July month had risen to their highest level since May 2008, nearly double the number killed the previous month. In all, the figures compiled by the Iraqi defense, interior and health ministries recorded 635 deaths for the month, 396 of them civilians. In addition, 50 Iraqi soldiers, 89 police officers were killed, along with 100 individuals declared by the Iraqi regime to have been "terrorists." Nearly another 1,400 Iraqis, the vast majority of them civilians, were wounded.

The US military heatedly disputed the casualty figures from the Baghdad regime, claiming that the real number killed in "enemy action" was only 222. This figure is absurd on its face. The Associated Press counted 350 Iraqis killed based solely on its own reporting. The news agency considers this a significant underestimate, given that many deaths do not get news coverage.

Just last week, the Baghdad Sunni neighborhood of Adhamiya saw insurgents overrun an Iraqi army checkpoint, killing 10 members of the security forces in a pitched battle.

Bombings and shooting remain daily occurrences, despite the

fact that the Iraqi capital remains under what amounts to martial law, with some 1,500 checkpoints and large numbers of concrete blast walls dividing its neighborhoods.

The increasing violence has been widely attributed to the continuing political stalemate in the efforts to cobble together a new government based on elections held last March, after being delayed from January. After five months of wrangling between the country's corrupt political factions, prospects for a coalition agreement appear even more distant. Over the weekend, the Iraqi National Alliance, a Shi'ite-based grouping that includes the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council (SIIC) of Ammar al-Hakim and the followers of radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, announced that it would no longer talk to the State of Law Coalition unless it chose someone else than incumbent Nouri al-Maliki as its candidate for premier.

There is speculation that the INA will now turn to the bloc led by former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, a secular Shiite who won electoral support from Iraq's Sunni population.

Behind the scenes, Iran has been backing the INA, while Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Syria have been supporting Allawi. None of the three factions can muster by itself the 163 majority in parliament needed to seat a new government.

The resulting tensions pose a serious threat that sectarian violence can erupt on a scale even greater than the bloodbath that swept the country in 2007.

As for the supposed "progress" hailed by Obama, it has passed by the great majority of the country's population. Four million Iraqis remain displaced refugees, roughly half of them forced to flee the country and the rest driven from their homes by the violence, with many subsisting in refugee and squatter camps inside Iraq. These camps have reportedly been swelled by new arrivals: people driven out of their homes by economic desperation.

Roughly a quarter of Iraq's nearly 30 million citizens are forced to subsist below the poverty line of approximately \$2 a day. Unemployment is rampant, rising in a number of provinces to over 30 percent. These conditions have worsened, not improved, since 2008.

Vast portions of the population are denied the most basic public services, from electricity and water to adequate sewerage. The *New York Times* reported Monday that in the capital of Baghdad, electricity was available only five hours a day last month, this despite the US allocating \$5 billion to the power sector. It is typical of the entire infrastructure. "Still, the streets are littered with trash, drinking water is polluted, hospitals are bleak and often unsafe, and buildings bombed by the Americans in 2003 or by insurgents since remain ruined shell," the *Times* reports.



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