

Iraq's top general calls for US forces to stay for another decade

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Lieutenant General Babaker Zerbari, the commander of the Iraqi armed forces created under US military occupation, on Wednesday publicly called for American troops to remain until at least 2020. Zerbari was speaking to Agency France Presse (AFP) about the looming August 31 deadline for the ostensible end of US combat operations in Iraq under the terms of the 2008 Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) signed between the Bush administration and the Iraqi government.

Under the agreement, 50,000 American troops will remain after the August deadline as “advice and assist” personnel but are to be withdrawn by the end of 2011. US special forces will nevertheless remain to carry out so-called “counter-terrorism” operations and US aircraft will continue to provide the primary air support to the Iraqi military.

The Iraqi general asserted that a “void” would exist if the 2011 schedule was kept and ongoing US combat operations did actually end. “I would say to the politicians: the US army must stay until the Iraqi army is fully ready in 2020,” he told AFP.

In other comments to the *Los Angeles Times*, Zerbari said: “In general, Iraqi soldiers and officers would like the American forces to stay in Iraq until they’re capable of doing the job 100 percent. Not a huge force, just three or four bases.”

At one level, the general’s comments simply restated what was always implicit in the 2008 agreement: that some degree of US military presence will remain in Iraq indefinitely. When the SOFA expires on December 31, 2011, troops can remain under the terms of the Strategic Framework Agreement—signed at the same time—which committed the two parties to a “long term relationship in economic, diplomatic, cultural and security fields” and specified that the US could use “diplomatic, economic or military measures” against “internal or external threats” to the government of Iraq.

The most obvious US presence will be air power. It has been repeatedly noted by both US and Iraqi military sources that Iraq will not have anything resembling an air force for years to come. Currently, it consists primarily of training and transport aircraft. Baghdad will not even take delivery of the first F-16 jet fighters it has ordered until 2013 and it lacks any of the helicopter gunships that the US military used with devastating effect throughout the war to suppress Iraqi insurgents and terrorise the civilian population.

The aim of the illegal US invasion in 2003 was to establish a puppet regime in Baghdad and a military footprint in the heart of the Middle East to further its ambitions for dominance in the energy-rich region and beyond.

The conduct of the US occupation over the past two years testifies to this fact. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent since the signing of the SOFA on improving the facilities at the three major military air bases in the country—Balad, Tallil and Al Asad—so they can land and service the entire range of US Air Force warplanes.

Washington has ensured that Iraqi air space will be open to the US Air Force—a key means for projecting power throughout the region—well after the end of 2011. The American officer in charge of training the Iraqi air force, Brigadier General Scott Hanson, bluntly told the *Los Angeles Times* that “we’re five years into a 10-15 year program.”

Zerbari’s remarks, however, embody more than the long-term strategic plans of Washington. They also reflect the tremendous nervousness in both the US and among sections of the pro-US elite in Iraq over the political instability and social conflicts that continue to wrack the country.

Every day, insurgent bombings or attacks on government forces take place, despite the suppression of

most armed resistance during 2007 and 2008 by US policies of buying off Shiite and Sunni resistance leaderships and systematically massacring those elements who continued to fight.

American troops no longer die in significant numbers as most now rarely leave their fortress-like bases. But so far in August, at least 38 Iraqi soldiers and police and over 100 civilians have lost their lives, according to a tally of press reports still maintained each day by the Iraqi Coalition Casualties web site. Most of the deaths have taken place in the capital Baghdad and Sunni centres such as Mosul, Ramadi and Fallujah that were the target of US military repression. The casualties among Iraqi security forces are likely to be the highest this month since the violence that preceded the March 7 election earlier this year.

The low level insurgency is raging amid political paralysis. Nearly six months after the election, the rival pro-occupation factions that have representation in the Iraqi parliament have still not agreed on the composition of a new government.

The two largest parliamentary blocs—the primarily Shiite State of Law coalition headed by caretaker prime minister Nouri al-Maliki and the largely Sunni-supported Iraqiya coalition led by former CIA asset Iyad Allawi—are both seeking to dominate the next regime in their own right, despite intense US pressure to agree to a “national unity” compact.

To date, however, neither bloc has been able to secure the support of the necessary 163 legislators to form a majority government in the 325-seat parliament.

The Shiite Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and the Shiite Sadrist movement loyal to cleric Moqtada al-Sadr could provide the parliamentary numbers needed to form a government. However, the US embassy has insisted on their exclusion from the corridors-of-power due to their relations with Iran, which has been targeted by Washington with economic sanctions and military threats.

No parliamentary session has taken place since January—allowing Maliki, whose coalition won only 89 seats, to make executive decisions unchallenged. In Sunni areas, as well as in the Kurdish north, his ongoing caretaker role is fuelling discontent and hostility. Large sections of the population live under terrible conditions, lacking basic services like clean water, electricity, health care and adequate housing. Millions endure unemployment and poverty. While the slaughter of more than one million people drowned much of the resistance

to the US occupation in blood, social tensions are explosive.

An Iraqi parliamentary official told the *Financial Times* yesterday: “Ten percent of parliamentarians [those involved in political negotiations] are active, the other 90 percent have nothing to do. The whole of Iraq is a vacuum, for God’s sake. You know when you get a black hole in the universe? It’s exactly the same now.”

The Obama administration responded to General Zerbari’s statements by downplaying the real state of affairs within Iraq. James Jones, Obama’s national security advisor, declared that the parliamentary factions were “making good progress” and “within the not-to-distant future” would come “to some accommodation”. Jones stated that the US commander in Iraq, General Raymond Odierno, was “very confident in the ability of the Iraqi security forces to handle a situation”.

The national security advisor to Vice President Joe Biden, Anthony Bilken, told journalists that the US would only need “dozens or maybe hundreds” of troops in Iraq from 2012 on, performing a similar role to that in other closely aligned US states. A White House staff member, Benjamin Rhodes, even stated that there would “be no US troops” in Iraq after 2011.

Such statements, on the eve of Congressional elections in the US, are primarily for domestic consumption and to substantiate Obama’s declaration earlier this month that the US had achieved a “responsible end” to the Iraq war (See: “Obama hails Iraq war in ‘withdrawal’ speech”).

Zerbari’s statements point to other discussions taking place. Not only will the US military continue to operate in some form in Iraq for long-term strategic reasons, thousands of American troops, along with thousands of private military contractors, may ultimately remain to ensure that the population does not rebel against the country’s reduction to a poverty-stricken US client state.



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