

US claims end of combat operations as violence mounts in Iraq

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19 August 2010

The White House and the Pentagon on Wednesday declared that the departure of a Stryker Brigade from Iraq marked the end of US combat operations, despite escalating violence in the country and the continued presence of tens of thousands of American troops.

The 4th Stryker brigade, 2nd Infantry Division crossed the border into Kuwait barely 24 hours after one of the bloodiest attacks seen in Baghdad in over a month. Meanwhile, 64,000 US troops continue to occupy Iraq, a number that is set to drop to 50,000 by the end of this month.

The suicide bombing Tuesday at an army recruiting center in Baghdad underscored the mounting tensions and instability wracking Iraq as the protracted stalemate in forming a new government continues.

A young man, described as having green eyes and long hair and wearing an army uniform, blew himself up in crowd of hundreds of would-be recruits who had lined up at the former Iraq defense ministry building in downtown Baghdad. At least 60 people were killed and another 120 wounded.

The attack was only the most spectacular in a series of armed actions aimed at security forces, judges, local officials and others accused of collaborating with the US-occupation.

Reports from the bombing at the recruitment center were telling, both in terms of the social conditions in Iraq and the mood among the Iraqi people.

The crush of applicants for the army is a measure of the increasing desperation of large sections of the Iraqi population, confronted with mass unemployment. The official jobless rate is 18 percent, but it is estimated that at least 51 percent of the population is either unemployed or underemployed. Even after the mass carnage, many of the applicants stayed at the scene, hoping that they would still be recruited.

The *Washington Post* reported: "At Medical City, the main hospital in Baghdad, people filed in and out of the morgue in a daze. There was no electricity inside, and at least 50 bodies were stacked in 115-degree heat.

"A young man named Ahmed walked outside after finding his brother dead. He cursed the Iraqi security forces as others around him blamed the government. 'Tens of young people are being slaughtered every day, and you filthy bastards are watching,' he screamed at the soldiers outside."

Popular anger toward the government has only grown as, nearly six months after an inconclusive parliamentary election, the major parties have been unable to cobble together a viable coalition.

On Monday, talks broke down between Ayad Allawi, the long-time CIA asset who was prime minister in the first "transitional government" set up by Washington after the 2003 invasion, and Nouri al-Maliki, the incumbent prime minister who now heads a shaky caretaker government. Allawi's Iraqiya bloc won 91 parliamentary seats. While Allawi is a secular Shia, his formation won the Sunni vote overwhelmingly. Maliki's predominantly Shia State of Law list won 89 seats.

Allawi's representatives blamed the breakdown on a statement by Maliki referring to the Iraqiya List as a Sunni bloc, which they rejected, insisting that it is a "nationalist" formation.

The dispute underscores the continuing sectarian tensions, fomented by the US occupation as it sought to employ divide-and-rule tactics in its ruthless suppression of Iraqi resistance.

Also underlying the stalemate in efforts to form a new government are, on the one hand, the lack of any genuine mass popular base for either of the two principal contenders—Maliki and Allawi—and, on the other, the conflicting interests of the US and Iran. The latter wields substantial influence over the Shia-based political parties.

Teheran has no desire to see a new government that is hostile to its interests and even more subservient to Washington. The Iranians are reportedly content to have Maliki remain in office, but are opposed to Allawi laying his hands on the reins of power.

The latest breakdown in talks followed what has been an aggressive intervention by US officials aimed at brokering a power-sharing deal based on a proposal that would significantly alter the Iraqi state structure. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the proposal was first floated by US Vice President Joseph Biden during his visit to Baghdad last July, and was pressed upon the Iraqis last weekend by a US emissary, Jeffrey Feltman, the assistant secretary for Near Eastern affairs.

It involves the creation of a powerful new executive post—the head of a new "council on national strategy"—a kind of security council that would presumably exercise substantial control over the country's security forces. The US proposal was reportedly that Allawi be given this post in exchange for Maliki being allowed to remain on as prime minister, albeit with significantly reduced powers.

The *Journal* quoted Osama al-Nujaifi, a prominent Sunni member of Allawi's bloc, as saying that Allawi would not relinquish his claim to the premiership and warning that the insurgency would grow in Sunni areas if it were denied him.

Saad al-Muttalibi, a member of Maliki's bloc and a senior government minister, issued a similarly stark warning. Referring to the recent violence, he told the *Al Jazeera* news agency: "Definitely there is a political background to this. Violence has escalated since the election. Any longer delay would leave Iraq on the verge of civil war."

After breaking off negotiations with Maliki's faction, Allawi entered talks with the formation led by the radical Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, which controls 40 seats in the new parliament. Sadr's faction, which has opposed Maliki remaining in his post, has rejected the US proposal for a new security council as unconstitutional.

Outgoing American ambassador to Iraq Christopher Hill expressed Washington's increasing frustration over Iran's influence in Iraqi politics during a farewell press conference at the State Department Tuesday.

"Whatever role they're playing, it's never helpful," he said. "And the Iranians, it seems, they don't understand that in the long run, if they want a good relationship with Iraq—and to put it mildly they've have had a very troubled relationship with Iraq—in the long run, if they want a better relationship, they're going to have to do a better job of respecting Iraq's sovereignty."

Having conducted an illegal invasion of the country and occupied it for more than seven years, Washington is in no position to lecture anyone about "respecting Iraq's sovereignty."

An Iranian spokesman dismissed the ambassador's unsolicited advice, pointing out that the US has never respected sovereignty anywhere, carrying out coups, assassinations and destabilization operations to further its aims.

"History is full of such measures and our hope to see a change in this approach is fading away," said the Iranian official. "That the Americans have made efforts to interfere in Iraq's internal affairs and strengthen its desired currents is so obvious that it does not merit an explanation."

Despite the growing crisis in Iraq, the Obama administration has continued to tout the troop withdrawals as the fulfillment of the president's campaign promise to bring the Iraq war to a close and to insist, against the evidence, that security in the country is improving.

Iraq remains "firmly on track," White House spokesman Bill Burton told reporters on Tuesday. "And we're confident that we're moving toward the end of our combat mission."

He dismissed the acrimonious sectarian divide that the abortive attempts to form a new government are exacerbating. "The fact that there is a lot of competition for who is going to be running that country is a good thing," said the spokesman.

The reality is that the 50,000 US troops remaining in the country, supposedly to "advise" and "train" Iraqi forces, remain combat ready, and the country's air space and shores remain under the control of the US military, with no indication that they will be ceded to the Iraqis any time soon.

In a comment reported last week by Voice of America, US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates indicated the underlying concerns of Washington in pressing for the rapid formation of a new government amenable to US interests.

Asked about the possibility that the US would keep troops in

Iraq beyond a December 2011 deadline for a complete withdrawal included in a status of forces agreement negotiated with Baghdad, Gates responded: "I think we have an agreement with the Iraqis that both governments have agreed to, that we will be out of Iraq at the end of 2011. If a new government is formed there and they want to talk about beyond 2011, we're obviously open to that discussion. But that initiative will have to come from the Iraqis."

While the continued US military occupation is opposed by wide majorities in both Iraq and the US, there is little doubt such an "initiative" will be forthcoming. Last week, Iraq's top military commander, Lt. Gen. Babaker Zerbari, called for US troops to stay in the country until at least 2020.

The forced optimism of the Obama administration's claims notwithstanding, the present drawdown of US troops—most of them bound for Afghanistan—will not bring the bloodshed in Iraq to a halt and does not signal a victory for US policy.

It is nearly seven-and-a-half years since the US launched its unprovoked invasion of Iraq. Having killed upwards of a million Iraqis, sacrificed the lives of 4,415 US troops and spent at least three quarters of a trillion dollars, Washington remains far from achieving its original goal of installing a reliable puppet regime in Baghdad and securing US hegemony in the oil-rich Persian Gulf region.

As preparations are made for a permanent occupation of Iraq and the war in Afghanistan continues to escalate, a new poll was released this week showing growing opposition in the US to both wars. According to the CNN poll, 69 percent of the American people oppose the war in Iraq, and 62 percent are against the war in Afghanistan. Moreover, an overwhelming majority rejected the "war on terror" justification for both wars. Only 28 percent said that withdrawing US troops from the two countries would make America more prone to attack.

Speaking during a visit to Afghanistan, Senator John Kerry (Democrat of Massachusetts), the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, contemptuously dismissed these popular sentiments, to which Obama and the Democrats largely owe their electoral victories in 2006 and 2008. "I understand the impatience, but impatience is not a strategy and impatience doesn't meet the security needs of our country," he said.



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