

US prepares permanent Iraq occupation

Bill Van Auken
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US Defense Secretary Robert Gates signaled Tuesday that the US is preparing to scrap a 2011 deadline for withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq, setting the stage for a permanent military occupation of the oil-rich country.

“We’ll stand by,” Gates told reporters. “We’re ready to have that discussion if and when they want to raise it with us.” The defense secretary, a holdover from the Bush administration, reiterated Washington’s formal position that while the “initiative clearly needs to come from the Iraqis; we are open to discussing it.”

The reality is that the Obama administration is presently exerting intense political pressure aimed at breaking an eight-month-old deadlock in the formation of a new Iraqi government so that it can have a US client regime capable of taking the “initiative” of asking American troops to stay.

US efforts have intensified in the aftermath of the midterm elections as part of a broad further turn to the right in both US foreign and domestic policies.

Last August, the Obama administration had celebrated the withdrawal of a single Stryker brigade from Iraq, proclaiming that its members were the last combat troops deployed in the country and that the US combat mission had ended.

The reality is that nearly 50,000 US troops remain in Iraq, the bulk of them with the same combat capabilities as the brigades that have been withdrawn. The US Air Force remains in control of Iraqi airspace and the US Navy controls its coastlines.

Obama sought to exploit the drawdown of US forces from their peak of 170,000—many of them redeployed to the “surge” in Afghanistan—for political purposes, claiming in the run-up to the elections that the Democratic president had fulfilled his campaign promise to end the war in Iraq.

This was a patent fraud. The timetable for the troop drawdown and the December 2011 final withdrawal

was set not by Obama, but rather by a Status of Forces Agreement negotiated between the Bush administration and the US puppet government of Nouri al-Maliki in Baghdad.

The Obama administration is now moving to abrogate this Bush era treaty in order to secure an indefinite US military grip over Iraq.

The immediate impediment to this plan is the absence of a government in Baghdad to sign a new agreement. Eight months after the election last March, the country’s rival political factions have been unable to cobble together a viable coalition.

The principal political factions convened a meeting Monday in the northern Kurdish capital of Irbil to discuss a power-sharing arrangement, but no deal was immediately forthcoming. Both Maliki and his principal challenger, the former prime minister and CIA asset Iyad Allawi, reiterated their claims to the prime minister’s office.

Iraqi political sources reported that Washington has demanded that a deal be worked out quickly. “We’ve been under tremendous pressure by the Americans ... in clearly asking President [Jalala] Talibani to step down,” a Kurdish official told Jane Araf of the *Christian Science Monitor*. Both Obama and Vice President Joe Biden have personally called in recent days to demand the resignation, he said.

The aim is to allow Allawi to assume the presidency and Maliki to remain as prime minister in a national unity government. Thus far, however, the Kurdish parties have shown no desire to surrender the office, which they see as an instrument for blocking any incursion on their semi-autonomous control of the north of the country.

Iraq has faced growing violence, posing the threat of a new eruption of sectarian civil war. Bombings Monday claimed the lives of at least 22 people in the Shia holy cities of Najaf and Karbala. The killings

come little more than a week after the massacre of 58 Iraqi Christians killed in the storming of the church where they had been taken hostage and a series of bombings in Baghdad's Shiite areas that killed at least 70.

As the political stalemate drags on, the discussion within the US military and foreign policy establishment has increasingly pointed toward the continuation of the US occupation.

The State Department last week released an audit warning that Iraq would continue to need the deployment of US troops to maintain stability after 2011 and warning that it would be too dangerous to turn over the defense of US interests in the country to civilians. According to the Associated Press, the State Department document echoed warnings by defense analysts and former diplomats that "hard-won security gains could crumble if US forces leave on schedule."

The report cast doubt on the ability of State Department personnel—in the absence of US military occupation forces—"to conduct their work in an environment in which 95 percent of the Iraqi population holds unfavorable or ambivalent views of the United States."

Ryan Crocker, the US ambassador to Iraq from 2007 to 2009, spoke along similar lines last week, declaring: "I worry that what we're seeing is a transition from a military lead to no lead. Simply put, the capacity does not exist on the civilian side to take on the vast array of roles and missions that the military has so ably performed in Iraq."

While preparing to extend the US military occupation of Iraq indefinitely, the Obama administration is also expected to issue a review of its Afghanistan policy next month that will prescribe "staying the course" in the current military surge that has driven up both civilian casualties and the death toll among US troops.

Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell last week reiterated the position of the military and of the White House that the July 2011 deadline that Obama announced for beginning the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan would not spell even the beginning of the end of the US war there.

The date, he said, would only mean that US commanders would assess in what parts of the country they could "begin to transition increasing security responsibility" to Afghan puppet forces. These would

not include the provinces where US troops are now doing the most killing and dying, such as Helmand, Kandahar and Kunar, the spokesman said.

Brought into office thanks in large measure to a wave of antiwar sentiment in the American population, Obama is continuing the wars and occupations that he inherited from the Bush administration, while ratcheting up US military threats against Iran, increasing the danger of a new and potentially far more catastrophic war.

This policy reflects the consensus position within the American ruling elite in support of using military force as a means of offsetting the crisis and decline of American capitalism through wars of aggression aimed at securing US hegemony over the energy rich Persian Gulf and Central Asia.

Reactionary and unpopular measures already planned, but held back until after the election, are being put into motion, preparing an escalation of the carnage caused by American militarism. The Republicans winning control of the House of Representatives has only served to drive the administration's policies, both foreign and domestic, even further to the right.

The struggle to end the ongoing US occupations and wars, and to prevent the outbreak of a far bloodier conflagration, can be waged only by the working class mobilizing its independent political strength against both major parties, the Obama administration and the profit system that they defend.

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