

Wall Street Journal condemns talk of US withdrawal from Iraq

James Cogan
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A *Wall Street Journal* editorial on December 31 expressed concern over the prospect that US military forces could leave Iraq this year. The comment was a response to an interview with the newspaper by Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, in which he stated that the expiry of a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) on December 31, 2011 was the unalterable date by which “the last American soldier will leave Iraq”.

The SOFA was signed on November 27, 2008 between the Bush administration and the Iraqi government headed by Maliki, with the endorsement of US president-elect Barack Obama. By that time, much of the anti-occupation resistance by Sunni-based insurgent groups and Shiite militias had been drowned in blood, or their leaderships had been bought off. Over one million Iraqis had lost their lives, four million were refugees and much of the country was in ruin.

The SOFA was presented to the devastated Iraqi population and to the American people as the beginning of the end of the war. Obama subsequently announced that US combat troops would leave by August 31, 2010.

The intention in Washington, however, was that the SOFA would be the first of a series of arrangements that guaranteed an indefinite, albeit reduced US military presence in Iraq. A “Strategic Framework Agreement” signed at the same time committed the two countries to a “long term relationship in economic, diplomatic, cultural and security fields”. The US has built, at considerable cost, a number of heavily fortified air bases, from which the 50,000 US troops still in Iraq primarily operate.

The *Journal*, clearly annoyed by Maliki’s comment, criticised the Iraqi prime minister for leaving “little wiggle room to keep US troops in Iraq beyond 2011”.

Implicitly acknowledging widespread popular hatred of the occupation inside Iraq, the editorial accused Maliki of “playing the nationalism card for his domestic audience”.

The editorial asserted that “US forces in Iraq can also have a stabilising impact in the region, much as US troops in Japan and South Korea have had in Asia nearly 60 years after the end of the Korean War”. The US military, the editorial declared, could “help to shield Iraq from undue Saudi or Iranian pressure” and make “Iran think twice about regional adventures”.

The reference to the presence of US troops in Japan and South Korea for 60 years sums up the actual perspective of the 2003 invasion of Iraq. As well as establishing US neo-colonial control over Iraq and its energy resources, the illegal war of aggression was part of a broader American strategy to dominate the Middle East and Central Asia. The US would thus be in a position to determine which of its major European and Asian rivals had access to the largest remaining energy reserves in the world.

The editorial justified an ongoing US presence in Iraq by pointing to the “fragility” of Maliki’s new government. Made up of rival Shiite-based movements, a largely Sunni coalition and Kurdish nationalists, it was only formed under pressure from Washington in December, nine months after the March elections.

The primary concern of the *Wall Street Journal* is that antagonisms within the government could be exploited by other powers to destabilise the country and derail US plans. It expressed particular alarm over the prominence in the government of the “anti-American Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr’s party”.

The social base of the Sadrists is the poverty-stricken Shiite working class in Baghdad and cities across southern Iraq which was deeply opposed to the US invasion and the subsequent puppet governments. Sadrist loyalists fought a series of battles with American troops in 2004 after an attempt was made to illegalise the movement and arrest Moqtada al-Sadr.

The US occupation regime agreed to a ceasefire with the Sadrists and allowed them to operate politically within Iraq. Maliki's first government in 2006 gave important ministries to the Sadrist faction in the parliament. The US, however, repeatedly accused the Sadrist-linked Shiite militias of taking Iranian aid to wage war against American forces. Allegations of Iranian influence over the Sadrists heightened when Moqtada al-Sadr went into voluntary exile in the Iranian city of Qom in 2007—ostensibly to undertake theological studies.

Despite bloody US and government military crackdowns on Sadrist strongholds in Basra and Baghdad in early 2008, the movement has retained its influence among the most oppressed layers of the Shiite population. The urban poor face conditions even worse than under the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein, without adequate housing, electricity, health services, social welfare or employment.

The Sadrists contested last year's election against Maliki—in a coalition with the Iranian-linked Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ICSI)—and won 40 seats. Maliki, desperate to retain power, sought out Sadrist support and has given them eight ministries in his new cabinet.

The Sadrists, reflecting the attitudes of their social base, opposed the original SOFA and have since insisted that December 31, 2011 is a non-negotiable deadline for a full US withdrawal. They are regularly presented in the media and by Sunni-based politicians as little more than a stalking horse for Tehran. Moqtada al-Sadr's return to Iraq last week has led to a new round of such commentary.

The main target of the *Journal* editorial was not so much Maliki, but the Obama administration, for failing to obtain the necessary agreements for American troops to remain in Iraq indefinitely. It concluded: "The Obama administration has known the 2011 deadline was coming,

and it's a blunder not to have been quietly negotiating with Mr. Maliki for a new forces agreement... Little time remains to sort out a compromise or get a new deal..."

While careful in his choice of words in the interview, Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki did leave himself, and also the Obama administration, with considerable "wiggle room". He stressed in his interview that while the current SOFA expired at the end of the year, "if the new government with parliament's approval wanted to reach another agreement with America, or another country, that's another matter".

Maliki also noted that the new "National Council for Higher Policies" would play a key role in recommending security policies to the parliament. The council is headed by former CIA asset Iyad Allawi, who served as the US occupation's unelected interim prime minister in 2003-2004 and heads the largely Sunni-based Iraqiya coalition. If Allawi's faction, the Kurds and Maliki's Shiite movement all endorsed a new SOFA, it would pass through the parliament, regardless of Sadrist opposition.

The Iraqi prime minister also referred to the fact that the US-created Iraqi military has "no fighter jets, no artillery and no tanks", which were necessary for what he referred to as "security from the outside", or external threats. While declaring that Iraq was not threatened at present, he indicated that in such an event US "security cooperation" would be covered by the Strategic Framework Agreement.

The editorial essentially amounted to an instruction to the White House to get on with either drawing up a new SOFA and/or manufacturing an external threat that justified long-term US security assistance. The most obvious candidate is Iran, which Obama, like Bush, continues to threaten with military action over its alleged nuclear arms program.



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