

In visit to Iraq, Gates indicates US troops to stay

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During what will likely be his last visit to Iraq as US defense secretary, Robert Gates suggested Thursday that combat soldiers would stay on past the end of 2011, the date the Obama administration has claimed would see the end of the American military presence in the country.

Well over 1 million Iraqis have died as a result of the illegal 2003 invasion and occupation of their country, several million have been made refugees, real unemployment remains close to 50 percent, and basic infrastructure—including water, sewerage, and electricity—has never recovered from US bombing.

Gates suggested, in the mendacious language of imperialism, that the continuation of a large-scale American military presence would be provided only if requested by the Iraqi government.

“We are willing to have a presence beyond [2011], but we’ve got a lot of commitments,” Gates said, referring implicitly to US military operations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Libya. “So if folks here are going to want us to have a presence, we’re going to need to get on with it pretty quickly in terms of our planning.”

“I think there is interest in having a continuing presence,” he added in remarks delivered to soldiers at Baghdad’s Camp Liberty. “The politics are such that we’ll just have to wait and see because the initiative ultimately has to come from the Iraqis.”

In fact, there has never been any serious doubt that the US would carry on a large-scale and long-term military presence in Iraq, which has the world’s fourth largest proven oil reserves and is in a critical strategic location in the Middle East. Under Obama, who capitalized on broad popular anger over the US war on Iraq to win the presidency in 2008, a significant share of the US “drawdown” of combat troops has been done

by giving new names to the same roles.

The US’s real intentions in Iraq are revealed by its recently completed embassy in the exclusive Green Zone in central Baghdad. The heavily fortified 104-acre campus is the largest embassy in the world. It includes a large Marine detachment and even its own power supply station.

Speaking to reporters in Baghdad on Thursday, Army General Lloyd Austin was less vague than Gates. He said that the inability of the Maliki government to appoint a defense minister in the wake of recent parliamentary elections showed it was incapable of making “informed decisions about whether to ask the Americans to stay longer,” according to one media account.

Austin and Gates were both indirectly expressing frustration over the massive popular opposition in Iraq to the US military presence, which makes it politically explosive for Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki to openly request the continuation of a large-scale occupation. Maliki’s thin parliamentary majority depends on the backing of political forces loyal to cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, which claim to speak for the urban Shiite masses bitterly opposed to the American presence.

Gates is reportedly concerned over the possible emergence of civil war between Arabs and Kurds in the north, and Sunnis and Shiites in the middle third of the country. These ethnic and sectarian tensions have in fact been inflamed by Washington for decades.

In reality, Gates is more worried about the potential for a social explosion over mass joblessness, a decrepit infrastructure and police abuse. These conditions are far more pronounced in Iraq than in Egypt and Tunisia, where popular revolts in February drove from power long-time US-aligned dictators Hosni Mubarak and

Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, respectively.

Expressing a combination of disdain for human suffering and imperialist hubris, Gates exclaimed that people all over the Arab world “would be happy if they could get to where Iraq is today—it isn’t perfect, but it’s new and it is a democracy and people do have rights.”

These “rights” are tolerated only to the extent they do not challenge the US or its stooge government. In early March, security forces violently repressed anti-government demonstrations, beat journalists, and seized the offices of two opposition formations, the Iraqi Nation Party and the Iraqi Communist Party. State-sponsored disappearances, killings, and torture remain a daily feature of life (see “Violent crackdown on Iraqi opposition”).

The Obama administration’s backing for violent repression in the broader region—when carried out by its client regimes—was underscored by Gates’s visit to Saudi Arabia a day earlier, where he had a brief discussion with King Abdullah.

The US media, led by the *New York Times*, has presented US-Saudi relations as being at a low point over ostensible disagreements relating to the Saudis’ role in attempting to crush protests in neighboring Bahrain. In fact, the Obama administration has refused to take any measures against Bahrain, which is home to the US Navy’s Fifth Fleet and sits across the Persian Gulf from Iran.

After the meeting with Abdullah, Gates repeated the line advanced by both the Saudi and Bahraini monarchies that Iran is responsible for fomenting unrest among the nation’s largely Shiite working class against the Sunni Khalifa monarchy.

“We already have evidence that the Iranians are trying to exploit the situation in Bahrain,” Gates declared, without providing any evidence. “And we also have evidence that they are talking about what they can do to try and create problems elsewhere as well.”

Gates also boasted of a recently completed \$60 billion arms sale to Saudi Arabia, which includes missiles, F-15 fighter jets, and a wide array of equipment that can be used to suppress a popular revolt.

In addition to baiting Iran, Gates warned of the resurgence of Al-Qaeda in the region, pointing to the mass protests in Yemen against President Ali Abdullah Saleh, another longtime US ally.

“Yemen has really eased up the pressure on Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula,” Gates said in Baghdad Thursday. “It’s also a concern that the internal security services of many of these countries have turned to their internal problems rather than broader counter-terrorism,” adding the US will “make sure these guys don’t make a free ride.”

The media did not bother to question the patent hypocrisy of these remarks. In Libya, the NATO bombing campaign against the regime of Muammar Gaddafi is working with rebel forces that include within their ranks known Islamist extremists and supporters of Al-Qaeda (see “Mounting evidence of CIA ties to Libyan rebels”).

Gates, who was appointed defense secretary under George W. Bush late in 2006 and was retained by Obama, is expected to resign in early summer. CIA Director Leon Panetta and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton have been named as possible replacements.



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