

US Defense Secretary Gates urges post-2011 occupation of Iraq

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Defense Secretary Robert Gates urged in a speech Tuesday that the US occupation of Iraq be continued beyond a December 31, 2011 deadline for the withdrawal of all American forces. He argued that the US military must remain on Iraqi soil to counter Iranian influence and maintain US power both within the country and the broader region.

Gates made the remarks in what is likely to be one of his last major speeches, delivered to the right-wing Washington think tank, the American Enterprise Institute. He is to step down as the Pentagon's civilian chief, a role he began under George W. Bush and continued under Barack Obama, on June 30. Gates is to be replaced by the current director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Leon Panetta.

Washington and the Iraqi regime headed by Nouri al-Maliki signed a status of forces agreement in November 2008 that calls for the end of all US military presence on Iraqi soil by the end of this year.

While President Obama declared last August that the US military had ceased all "combat operations" in Iraq, over 46,000 American troops remain deployed in the country and the Pentagon continues to control dozens of bases across Iraq, including large strategic air bases in Balad, Tallil and Al Asad.

Gates argued that the Iraqi military is incapable of defending the country, lacking ability in logistics and intelligence and having "no capacity to defend their own airspace." These failings are by design, given that Washington's sole interest has been to train a puppet force that remained dependent upon the US military.

But the main purpose of the US maintaining an occupation force in Iraq, Gates argued, is to "send a powerful signal to the region that we're not leaving."

"It would be reassuring to the Gulf States," said Gates, referring to the collection of dictatorial monarchies headed by Saudi Arabia that have ruthlessly repressed protests demanding democratic rights and equality, particularly in Bahrain. "It would not be reassuring to Iran, and that's a

good thing," he added.

The outgoing US defense secretary's remarks speak volumes as to both the real aims of the Iraq war—behind the lies about weapons of mass destruction and pretenses of fostering democracy—and Washington's current policy in the region. From the outset, the war was waged to establish control over a country that has the world's fourth largest proven oil reserves and to assert US hegemony over the broader region. This drives the US inexorably toward continuing its occupation and preparing yet another war, this time against Iran, which poses a challenge to its regional dominance.

This is the consensus policy within the American ruling elite and is embraced by Obama, his campaign rhetoric about bringing US troops home from Iraq notwithstanding.

Gates's speech is only the latest in a series of US actions designed to pressure the Maliki government into formally requesting a renegotiation of the Status of Forces Agreement to allow continued US occupation. Both Gates and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, visited Iraq last month to push for the same goal, and there have been numerous trips by State Department officials for this purpose.

Part of this campaign is being conducted using the Iraqi military command, which has developed under US tutelage. The Reuters news agency reported Wednesday that the Iraqi generals are expected to present a report to Maliki making the case that Iraqi forces are not sufficient to defend the country.

This would presumably provide the Maliki government with a case for continuing the US military presence. "The purpose of this was to sort of bleed some of the political venom out of the debate," a US official told Reuters.

As Gates acknowledged in his speech Tuesday, extending the US occupation would represent "a political challenge for the Iraqis, because whether we like it or not, we're not very popular there." Given the deaths of over a million Iraqis and the wholesale destruction of Iraqi society wrought by the US war, this is a vast understatement.

On May 11, Maliki announced that he intended to consult with the country's political parties on whether the deadline for a US withdrawal should be extended and indicated that he would submit the issue to the Iraqi parliament.

This proposal, however, drew a swift rebuke from the radical Islamic cleric, Moqtada al-Sadr, who declared, "We will not accept the occupation's troops staying, not even for one day after the end of this year."

Maliki's shaky "national unity" government, cobbled together last December under US pressure more than nine months after the March 2010 elections, could easily fall apart as a result of an extension.

The Sadrist movement, which staged a brief armed uprising against the US occupation in 2004, controls 30 seats in parliament and holds several positions in Maliki's cabinet. While Sadr has appeared to back away from calls for renewed armed resistance if US troops remain on Iraqi soil in 2012, his movement opposes any such extension in order to maintain credibility within its base among the impoverished Shiite populations of Baghdad and southern Iraq.

The push for extending the occupation has been accompanied by an increasing number of attacks on US forces in Iraq, particularly in the south. US commanders have attributed them to Shiite militias linked to the Sadrist movement.

These have included mortar, rocket and rocket-propelled grenade attacks on US bases as well as improvised explosive device (IED) attacks on American convoys. Two US soldiers were killed in such a bombing last Sunday in Baghdad. Their deaths bring the total number of Americans killed since the beginning of the Iraq war more than eight years ago to 4,454. Twenty-four have died since the beginning of this year.

The US defense secretary's appearance at the American Enterprise Institute Tuesday was scheduled to coincide with the think tank's release of a paper by Frederick Kagan, a prominent neo-conservative adviser to the Pentagon and early advocate of the Iraq war, entitled "The dangers to the United States, Iraq and Mideast stability of abandoning Iraq at the end of 2011."

Arguing for the negotiation of a new US-Iraqi security pact providing for an open-ended continuation of the American military occupation, Kagan writes, "The Iraqi Security Forces will not be able to defend Iraq's sovereignty, maintain its independence from Iran, or ensure Iraq's internal stability without American assistance, including some ground forces in Iraq, for a number of years."

Kagan's method of argumentation is to start with the aim of maintaining US military forces in Iraq and work

backward. Thus, while acknowledging that there is no deployment of Iranian military forces that threaten Iraq, he conjures up an Iranian armored invasion cutting Iraq off from the Persian Gulf, the bombing of Baghdad by Iranian warplanes and a missile war destroying Iraq's oil facilities.

To counter such threats, he continues, Iraq would have to build up formidable ground and air forces, which in turn would threaten Saudi Arabia.

Rather than "scare its neighbors or waste resources better spent on improving the lives of its people," Kagan argues, Iraq should simply keep US occupation forces in place.

Giving an unmistakable signal as to the permanence of such an arrangement, he continues: "The American military guarantee and presence has kept the peace in Europe and East Asia for more than six decades. A similar guarantee and presence could also reduce potential sources of conflict in Mesopotamia."

Incredibly, Kagan suggests that accepting permanent US military occupation is the only means of guaranteeing Iraq's "independence."

Iraqi leaders, he writes, "must choose what kind of Iraq they want—an independent, fully sovereign state beholden to no one, or a weak state, riven with internal tensions, subject to the constant manipulation and domination of its Persian neighbors."

How an Iraq occupied by US military forces would be independent and "beholden to no one," Kagan doesn't bother trying to explain.

For good measure, he throws in a warning to Maliki and other Iraqi leaders about going ahead with the agreement for the withdrawal of US troops. He writes that they "should beware the persistent dangers of the Arab Spring to would-be autocrats and those who appear to place control of their countries in the hands of foreigners."

While imperialist hubris may blind Kagan, Iraqi leaders are well aware of such dangers, which is why the troop withdrawal has created such a crisis within the country's elites. While most of them would like to maintain the US military presence, precisely as a protection against the kind of revolutionary upheavals that have swept the region, they recognize that there is such hostility to the American military presence among the masses of Iraqi working people, that a deal to extend the occupation could provoke a far greater revolutionary challenge.



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