

# US defense secretary visits Iraq to extract new troop agreement

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The Obama administration's recently installed defense secretary, Leon Panetta, flew unannounced into Iraq on Monday to pressure the Iraqi government to finalise a formal treaty to sanction the continued occupation of the country by American forces.

Panetta, the former head of the CIA, met with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, President Jalal Talabani and the president of the autonomous Kurdish region, Massoud Barzani. The key issue discussed was the December 31 expiry of the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) signed between the Bush administration and Maliki's government in late 2008.

Barely five months before the SOFA ends, no new agreement has been reached to legitimise the US military presence in Iraq.

Last Thursday, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, had confidently told journalists in Washington that talks were underway to finalise a new pact. On Saturday, following a meeting of Iraqi parliamentary leaders, Talabani had declared they would come to a consensus within two weeks to extend the American presence into 2012. This was immediately downplayed by Maliki's media advisor, however. He complained that the meeting had been dominated by "partisan or religious stances" and no unified position was likely to be achieved any time soon.

After meeting with Iraqi leaders on Monday, Panetta publicly vented the frustration he had clearly conveyed to Maliki and others over the impasse. He told an assembly of US troops in Baghdad: "Do they want us to stay? Don't they want us to stay? Damn it, make a decision!"

The Obama administration has no intention of removing American troops at the end of the year. After more than eight years of military operations and as much as \$3 trillion

in war-related spending, Washington is determined to realise the objectives behind the illegal invasion in 2003—dominance over the country's vast energy resources and the establishment of a compliant puppet state in the heart of the Middle East.

Some 46,000 US military personnel are still occupying 53 bases throughout Iraq, including the strategic Balad air base in the north and the Ali or Tallil air base in the south. American aircraft also continue to use the Al Asad air base in the western province of Anbar.

The immediate US objective is to ensure long-term access to these bases and maintain a garrison of between 10,000 and 30,000 troops. The military force would complement the political operations of the US embassy, which dominates Baghdad's central "Green Zone." Larger than Vatican City, the embassy has its own power plant and a staff of some 5,500 officials, marines, elite special forces units and intelligence agents. As many as 50 aircraft and helicopters are located within its heavily fortified walls.

US ambassador James Jeffrey earlier this month requested \$6.2 billion from Congress to cover the embassy's operations in 2012. In subsequent comments, he stressed the importance of Iraq to the US, highlighting its energy reserves. He told journalists that Iraq was on a "glide path" to dramatically increase its oil production. He noted that "there's no other source of millions of new barrels [of oil] in the pipeline anywhere in the world."

Moreover, Jeffrey stated, Iraq was "the only source of enough gas for Europe to become more diversified in energy sources," noting that "Azeri gas is not sufficient, Turkmen gas is many years off." Jeffrey's comment underscored US concerns over the growing dependence of Western Europe on Russian supplies of gas. The war on Libya has been driven by similar geo-political considerations.

This week, European transnational Royal Dutch Shell announced a \$12.5 billion investment in a joint-venture gas production project in southern Iraq.

Every wing of the Iraqi elite has proven willing to serve these predatory interests. In various ways, they have all accommodated to the US invasion in return for a parasitic existence derived from the oil industry. Iraq is ranked among the four most corrupt countries in the world, with billions in oil revenue plundered every year, while unemployment and underemployment is as high as 50 percent and poverty endemic.

Maliki's government—an unstable coalition of his Da'wa Party, the Kurdish nationalist parties and the Shiite fundamentalist Sadrist movement led by Moqtada al-Sadr—is nevertheless nervous about signing a new agreement and has delayed it as long as possible.

The Iraqi elites are acutely aware that the majority of Iraqis are bitterly opposed to a continued American military presence. The US occupation destroyed much of the country's infrastructure, and fomented ethnic and sectarian conflict in order to divide and rule the population. Over one million Iraqis have lost their lives and millions more have been injured or psychologically traumatised. The large scale resistance that followed the invasion was literally drowned in blood.

There are also signs of escalating unrest over living standards and democratic rights. Class and social questions are starting to emerge, undoubtedly inspired in part by the mass upheavals taking place in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria.

Protests in the Kurdish north in February demanding democratic rights were suppressed by the autocratic Kurdish authority. Workers in the southern oilfields threatened strike action in May until they were paid substantial wage rises. Unemployed youth have demonstrated in Basra and Baghdad.

In their comments, Panetta and Mullen both used an upsurge in attacks on US troops to revive long-standing accusations that Iran is supplying missiles and other munitions to Shiite-based militias. Three missiles were fired into the Green Zone as Panetta arrived to hold talks with Maliki. Panetta declared: "We're very concerned about Iran and the weapons they're providing to extremists in Iraq. We cannot sit back and simply allow this to continue ... It's something we're going to take on head on."

The accusations against Tehran—which it again categorically denied—feed into the central argument that is being fashioned in both Washington and the Iraqi establishment: that American forces must remain to serve as a deterrent to alleged Iranian attempts to dominate the country. Mullen told a press conference that Iraqi security forces would face "clear capability gaps" if the US withdrew and Baghdad would "need help" for years with its air force and intelligence.

Within 24 hours of Panetta's talks with Maliki on Monday, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the Iraqi government had reversed a decision made earlier in the year not to purchase US F-16 fighter aircraft. The newspaper claimed Iraq was now moving to purchase between 18 and 36 of the fighters, in a multi-billion dollar deal that would "counter Iranian influences and cement long-term ties with Baghdad after American troops pull out." The deal would include "parts, spares, training and related weaponry"—requiring an ongoing US military presence.

The *Wall Street Journal* editorial on Wednesday demanded that the Obama administration and the Maliki government rapidly settle the question of a new status of forces agreement, in order to block "Iran's designs on Iraq."

The editorial declared: "America's continued troop presence can fill in security gaps and provide a stabilising influence in Iraq and the region. The US has kept troops in South Korea and Japan for six decades after the end of the wars there, and a similar presence in Iraq might be as salutary... A long-term security relationship with Iraq can best ensure that the sacrifices made in the last decade aren't squandered."

The *Journal* editorial sums up the designs of the American ruling elite—it intends Iraq to remain a de-facto US colony for decades to come.



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