

# Talks begin on extending US occupation of Iraq

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A meeting of the leaders of major factions in the Iraqi parliament agreed on Tuesday night to re-negotiate the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with the US government and thus sanction the presence of American forces beyond December 31, 2011. Without an extension, another mechanism would be needed to justify US troops remaining in Iraq.

The decision followed talks on Monday in Baghdad between Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and other Iraqi powerbrokers and the head of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen. Mullen repeated Washington's demand that the Iraqi parliament "make a decision as soon as possible" on a SOFA extension. He declared that an agreement had to retain "privileges and immunities for our American men and women in uniform." Under the current SOFA, US forces are immune from prosecution by Iraqi courts for any crimes committed while on combat operations or within their bases.

The Obama administration is determined to retain the strategic gains made by the US through the illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003. Washington wants ongoing access to key air bases in the heart of the Middle East, from which it can counter any threat to its interests in the world's largest oil-producing region. The US is equally determined to retain a compliant American puppet regime in Iraq into the indefinite future. Iraq's large untapped oil and gas resources are now being opened up to large-scale investment and exploitation. The US intends to shape the process and ensure that American corporations benefit.

Despite constant US pressure, the pro-occupation Iraqi elites have balked for months at issuing an

"invitation" for American forces to remain—particularly in light of the explosive political upheavals in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere in the region. For the overwhelming majority of Iraqis, the US occupation has been a catastrophe and they bitterly oppose any ongoing American presence. At least 1.2 million Iraqis lost their lives during the first five years of occupation, some four million were forced to flee their homes and large parts of the country were devastated.

Thousands of people confront serious health problems due to the hundreds of tonnes of US depleted uranium munitions strewn across the country. According to research by *Al Jazeera*, the cancer rate in the southern Shiite province of Babil rose from 500 diagnosed cases in 2004 to 9,082 in 2009. One in four babies is born with defects in the city of Fallujah, which was largely destroyed by US bombing in 2004 as brutal collective punishment for resisting the US occupation.

Economically, the Iraqi working class faces mass unemployment and dysfunctional services. The regime that the US imposed is brutal and corrupt. Sectarian and ethnic tensions, which were consciously stirred up by the occupation forces, continue to be exploited to divide the population. This week, bomb blasts claimed lives in the cities of Mosul and Kirkuk, where rival Kurdish and Arab nationalists are fighting for dominance.

The depth of popular hatred toward the US occupation prompted the parliamentary faction loyal to Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr to walk out of Tuesday's meeting in a token protest. To maintain their main base of support in the working class districts of Baghdad and

other southern cities, the Sadrists posture as opponents of any foreign troop presence, even as they serve as ministers in Maliki's cabinet. The conservative Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), which is seeking to rebuild its credibility among the Shiite masses after years of collaborating with US forces, has also refused to endorse a new SOFA at this stage.

The parties supporting a new agreement were Maliki's Shiite-based Da'wa Party; the largely Arab Sunni-based Iraqiya, headed by former CIA asset Iyad Allawi; and Kurdish nationalist parties that preside over the autonomous Kurdish region in the country's north.

Without the backing of the other Shiite parties, Maliki had to offer significant concessions to Iraqiya to secure its support for re-negotiating the SOFA. The parliament voted on Wednesday to form a long-promised national security council that Allawi will head. Maliki also announced that he would finally appoint ministers for defence and internal security—posts he has personally held since forming his cabinet last December—and ask Iraqiya to nominate the candidates for the positions.

A formal Iraqi request for US forces to remain is expected to be carefully formulated to placate popular opposition. Reports in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* suggest that as few as 10,000 of the 49,000 American personnel still in Iraq are likely to be asked to stay. They will be described as “trainers” for the Iraqi Army. However, they will include American special forces units, which will continue to spearhead operations against insurgent organisations that remain active in parts of the country.

Ground crews, maintenance staff, air defence batteries and protection units will service the US aircraft that will continue to operate from key strategic air bases. American and Iraqi military figures have repeatedly declared that ongoing US access to Iraq's air space is essential, on the grounds that the country does not have an effective air force. Maliki has ordered 36 F-16 fighters from the US but they will not be delivered until 2014 at the earliest and will require long-term American assistance to keep them in the air.

The US military personnel who remain will be only one facet of an ongoing US occupation. According to a National Public Radio report in May, at least eight private military companies have been hired to provide ongoing “services” in Iraq.

The US State Department has contracted its own private army. As many as 5,000 mercenary contractors have been employed to protect the massive embassy in Baghdad and US consulates in other major Iraqi cities. These include the crews of a fleet of helicopter gunships operated by DynCorp International, and ground protection squads from companies such as Aegis, Global Security and International Development Services. The latter has links with the notorious former Blackwater Corporation.



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