

Washington plans to keep thousands of US troops in Iraq

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The Obama administration has reportedly decided to leave thousands of US troops deployed in Iraq after a withdrawal deadline expires at the end of this year.

Citing senior military officials, the *New York Times* reported Wednesday that the plan calls for 3,000 to 4,000 US military personnel to remain in the country after December 31, when a Status of Forces Agreement signed between the Bush administration and the Iraqi regime calls for all American troops to be withdrawn from the country.

While the same plan was first reported by Fox News and subsequently was attributed to military officials in an article published by the *Los Angeles Times*, the administration and the Pentagon claimed Wednesday that the reports were false.

In Washington, Army Gen. Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, insisted that there had been no decision on how many troops would remain in Iraq. And in Baghdad, US Ambassador James F. Jeffrey said that the 3,000 figure had not been raised in any discussions. “That number has no official status or credibility,” he told the Associated Press.

On Tuesday, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta insisted that “no decision has been made” on the number of troops that would remain in Iraq after the end of the year. “That obviously will be the subject of negotiations with the Iraqis and as a result of those negotiations,” he said.

These plans are another example of the political duplicity of the Obama administration. Obama won the Democratic presidential nomination and then the presidential election in 2008 largely because of the perception promoted by his backers that he was an opponent of the Iraq war and would quickly withdraw all US troops.

Shortly after taking office, however, the Democratic president adopted entirely the timetable set by his Republican predecessor. In August of last year, he proclaimed that the US “combat mission” was over. Nonetheless, 46,000 US troops remain in Iraq, including combat units, and the administration has repeatedly indicated that it wants to keep military forces in the country, while insisting that it can do so only at the request of the Iraqi government.

Iraqi President Nuri Kamal al-Maliki has stalled on promises to negotiate a continuing US military presence. The proposal to keep American troops on the ground is deeply unpopular among the overwhelming majority of Iraqis, who saw over a million of their

countrymen killed, four million driven into exile and basic social infrastructure and institutions destroyed by over eight years of war and US occupation.

Maliki faces the threat that an agreement with Washington on continuing the American military presence would provoke the downfall of his government, which depends upon the support of various parties, including the movement led by the radical Shiite cleric, Moqtada al-Sadr, which has threatened to launch armed attacks if US troops remain in the country after December 31

The announcement has become the occasion for a push by military officers and bourgeois politicians of all stripes for even greater US troop deployments to Iraq. In its report, Fox News described senior US military commanders as “livid” over the 3,000 troop proposal. According to the *New York Times*, Gen. Lloyd Austin, the top US commander in Iraq, had proposed that as many as 18,000 American troops remain deployed in the country.

According to Fox, commanders expressed concerns about the ability of a force as small as 3,000 to protect itself. “We can’t secure everybody with only 3,000 on the ground nor can we do what we need to do with the Iraqis ... There is almost no room for security operations in that number; it will be almost purely a training mission.”

The *Times* said that “many commanders had hoped to see a robust presence continue in a region that is viewed as strategic to US interests.”

The purported plan drew fire from both Democrats and Republicans on Capitol Hill. “I think it is a mistake,” Dianne Feinstein, the California Democrat who chairs the Senate Intelligence Committee told reporters. “I think it’s too fast.”

Three Senators who have been strong proponents of US military interventions—Republicans John McCain of Arizona and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina and independent Joe Lieberman—issued a statement condemning the proposal.

“This is dramatically lower than what our military leaders have consistently told us over the course of repeated visits to Iraq that they require, and that is needed to support Iraq in safeguarding the hard-won gains that our two nations have achieved at such great cost,” the statement said.

Defense Secretary Panetta and other US officials have made repeated trips to Baghdad in recent months to pressure the Maliki government to issue a formal request for US troops to remain in the country.

The report leaked to Fox and the *Times* may well be part of this

campaign, aimed at pushing the Iraqi regime to negotiate a deal for the deployment of a substantially higher number of troops. Washington is demanding that any such deal include a renewal of the agreement immunizing all US military personnel from prosecution under Iraqi law for crimes carried out against the population.

Iraqi officials with closer ties to Washington have begun mounting their own public efforts to promote such an agreement. Massoud Barzani, the leader of Iraq's Kurdish autonomous region, made a televised speech on Tuesday appealing for US troops to stay.

"In my opinion if the American forces withdraw, there will be a possibility of civil war," Barzani said. "Iraqi security forces are still not prepared to secure protection for Iraq and the Iraqi army is not prepared to guard borders and the air force possesses nothing."

Similarly, Ayad Allawi, the head of the Iraqi National Accord party, who served as a longtime "asset" of the US Central Intelligence Agency, wrote an opinion column for the *Washington Post*, insisting that the "original US troop 'surge'" had yet to achieve its aims and that Iraq's security forces "are riddled with sectarianism and mixed loyalty; they are barely capable of defending themselves, let alone the rest of the country."

Allawi provided a grim description of present conditions in Iraq, reporting "most of the country has only a few hours of electricity a day," and that "Iraq's economy has become an ever more dysfunctional mix of cronyism and mismanagement, with high unemployment and endemic corruption."

Whatever the precise purpose of the proposal to limit the post-2011 US military presence to 3,000 troops, the Obama administration and the Pentagon have no intention of loosening the US grip on Iraq or abandoning the goals that drove the US war in the first place. Just as the Bush administration before it, it is determined to pursue US hegemony over the strategic oil-rich region, and to secure a lasting military presence as a means of defending its control.

The US State Department has unveiled plans to deploy a mercenary army of some 5,500 private security contractors, similar to the Blackwater guards who were responsible for the 2007 massacre in Baghdad's Nisour Square in which 17 Iraqi civilians were killed. These contractors would not only guard the massive US embassy complex in Baghdad's "Green Zone," which is the largest such facility in the world, occupying more space than Vatican City. They would also be equipped to carry out paramilitary operations.

Proposals are also being discussed for the deployment of thousands of other military contractors to train Iraqi troops in the use of new weapons that Washington aims to sell the regime in Baghdad, including F-16 fighter jets.

And, as the *Wall Street Journal* reported Tuesday, senior military commanders and intelligence officials are pushing for the White House to issue a presidential "finding" that would authorize the CIA to carry out a stepped-up covert war against Iranian interests inside Iraq.

"Such a step would reflect the U.S.'s effort to contain Iranian activities in the region," the *Journal* reported. "Ending the U.S.'s involvement in the Iraqi conflict was a central promise of

President Barack Obama's 2008 campaign, and the administration wants to ensure it doesn't withdraw troops only to see its main regional nemesis, Iran, raise its influence there."

Under the cover of a covert CIA operation, the report adds, the US could deploy US special operations troops in Iraq "assigned to operate temporarily under CIA authority." These troops have been responsible for "kill or capture" missions aimed at crushing Iraqi insurgents.

The US has long carried out such operations against Iran. In one infamous example, US troops conducted a 2007 raid on the Iranian consulate in the northern Iraqi city of Erbil, kidnapping five Iranian diplomats and confiscating all documents and computers from the office in a gross violation of international law. The diplomats were subsequently held for nearly two years in a secret prison.

The Pentagon has repeatedly charged Iran with arming and supporting Shiite militias in Iraq, which the US blames for recent American casualties. Tehran has denied the charges, claiming that they have been trumped up to provide a pretext for continued US occupation of Iraq.

Of more concern to Washington than supposed weapons smuggling, however, are the growing economic ties between Iran and Iraq. This week, the two countries announced the formation of a joint investment company to facilitate joint venture industrial projects. Last July, the two governments announced that they would seek to increase trade between the two countries—expected to reach \$10 billion by the end of this year—to \$20 billion in the near future. The two countries, together with Syria, have also signed a \$10 billion pipeline agreement that is projected to reach from Iran's natural gas fields through Iraq and Syria and ultimately to the Mediterranean via Lebanon.

Washington is reacting with increasing bellicosity to the threat that the domination of Iraq that it sought to secure by military means could be lost to growing ties with Iran.

Tensions have also risen between Washington and Teheran as a result of the revolutionary struggles loosely referred to as the "Arab spring." Washington fears, on the one hand, that the kind of mass upheavals seen in Egypt or Bahrain could topple its client regime in Baghdad. On the other hand, US imperialism is determined to exploit the crisis in the region as a means of escalating its drive for hegemony.

For its part, Tehran sees Western demands for the ouster of the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria as a direct threat to its interests in region, and is likely to more aggressively pursue ties to Iraq to counter threatened isolation.

These tensions are at the heart of the debate on continued US military presence in Iraq, which is directed not merely at securing US imperialism's predatory interests in Iraq itself, but at preparing for yet another military confrontation with Iran.



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