

Obama announces US troop withdrawal from Iraq

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US President Barack Obama announced Friday that the remaining US troops in Iraq would be withdrawn from the country before the end of December, following the collapse of talks with the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki on extending the US presence into 2012.

Obama, in a statement delivered on short notice at a hastily called press appearance, portrayed the decision as the realization of a promise from the 2008 election campaign to end the war in Iraq. The pretense of fidelity to a campaign promise is ludicrous, given that the Obama administration has been striving for most of this year to overturn the December 31, 2011 deadline for a full US withdrawal, negotiated by the Bush administration in 2008.

US political and military officials have shuttled in and out of Iraq for months seeking to browbeat the Maliki government into a deal that would keep US troops in Iraq into 2012 and beyond. They proposed first to keep tens of thousands, then 18,000, then 5,000, then 3,000, but ultimately no deal could be finalized before the deadline.

Obama extended the war for nearly three years after taking office, and essentially carried out the policy adopted by the Bush administration before its departure.

The lack of advance notice of Obama's White House announcement of the supposed end of the nearly nine-year war and the curious timing of the announcement—shortly before 1 PM on a Friday afternoon—suggest an attempt to keep the statement low-key and direct it largely to an Iraqi audience.

Obama's announcement was broadcast live in Iraq at about 8 PM local time. This indicates that the statement, claiming an end to the US occupation and the beginning of a new relationship between "sovereign" and "equal" partners, was aimed at least in part at placating mass hostility in Iraq to the US troop presence, while providing Iraqi parliamentarians and politicians with political cover to negotiate some new deal to return US troops to the country.

The Iraqi defense minister followed Obama's statement with one of his own declaring the need for a continued US troop presence, ostensibly to train Iraqi forces.

Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki is to visit Washington in December for further talks, and Obama held out the possibility of a future agreement to station US troops in Iraq in the guise of training Iraqi soldiers in the use of weapons systems the Iraqi government is buying from American military contractors.

There is no disguising, however, the debacle for the foreign

policy of American imperialism. After nine years of warfare, with 4,400 US troops killed, tens of thousands wounded, and trillions of dollars squandered, the United States will lose its privileged access to bases on Iraqi soil as well as the legal immunity enjoyed by US soldiers.

The announcement produced bitter recriminations from Republican presidential candidates and representatives of the core of neoconservative pundits and strategists who played a central role in the Bush administration's drive to war in Iraq.

Frederick Kagan of the American Enterprise Institute, a leading adviser to General David Petraeus in the 2008 "surge" of US troops into Iraq, condemned the action as empowering the regime in neighboring Iran. "I don't see how you can talk about containing Iran when you leave Iraq to its own devices in such a way that it has no ability to protect itself," he told the *Wall Street Journal*.

Republican presidential frontrunner Mitt Romney denounced the decision, declaring, "President Obama's astonishing failure to secure an orderly transition in Iraq has unnecessarily put at risk the victories that were won through the blood and sacrifice of thousands of American men and women."

Congresswoman Michele Bachmann complained that the United States was being "kicked out" of Iraq "by the very people we liberated." She complained, "Once we're finished in Iraq, we'll have more troops in Honduras than we'll be leaving behind in Iraq."

Significantly, however, the congressional Republican leadership was far more cautious in its response. House Speaker John Boehner claimed that the war in Iraq was a military victory won by American troops "under the strategy developed and implemented by our generals, and the leadership of both President Bush and President Obama."

Romney, his chief rival Texas Governor Rick Perry, and several other Republican presidential candidates suggested that in taking the action, Obama was caving in to antiwar public opinion in the United States. "President Obama is putting political expediency ahead of sound military and security judgment," Perry said, while Romney chimed in that he wanted to know what the US military advice to Obama had been—ignoring the inconvenient fact that it was political opposition within Iraq, not in the United States, that blocked an agreement.

In the face of overwhelming popular hostility to a continued American occupation, not one of the parties represented in the

Iraqi parliament was willing to support an agreement that declared that US soldiers could not be held accountable under Iraqi law for crimes committed against Iraqi citizens.

This includes not only Maliki's Dawa Party, which heads a shaky coalition dependent on support from the radical anti-American cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, but also the Sunni-based Iraqiya coalition, headed by the former CIA asset Ayad Allawi, who felt compelled to oppose any agreement with his former paymasters. Even the Kurdish nationalist parties, the KDP and PUK, which have long enjoyed close relations with Washington, opposed any continuing grant of immunity to American soldiers in Iraq.

At a press conference in Baghdad, Maliki said, "When the issue of immunity was brought up and the Iraqi side was told that the American side won't leave a single soldier without full immunity, and the Iraqi answer was that it's impossible to grant immunity to a single American soldier, negotiations stopped regarding the numbers, location and mechanics of training."

The Obama administration and the Pentagon insisted on maintaining the regime of legal impunity, despite or rather because of the countless atrocities committed in the course of the invasion and conquest of Iraq and the occupation that followed. These were perpetrated not only by uniformed US soldiers, but also by tens of thousands of paramilitary security personnel, Blackwater mercenaries and plainclothes spies and operatives.

At least 5,000 of these mercenaries will remain in Iraq after December 31, most of them working as security contractors for the huge US Embassy in Baghdad, the largest in the world. The State Department will have a staggering 16,000 employees in Iraq, according to one estimate. These will have diplomatic immunity, but the security contractors will be subject to arrest and prosecution in Iraqi courts in the event of future actions like the Blackwater massacre in Nisour Square in Baghdad four years ago.

Obama sought to put the best possible face on the political setback, claiming that he and Maliki "are in full agreement about how to move forward" and that future US-Iraqi relations would be conducted as "a normal relationship between sovereign nations, an equal partnership based on mutual interests and mutual respect." As though such a relationship were possible between an invaded country that saw a million of its citizens slaughtered and its infrastructure destroyed and the invading power which perpetrated that catastrophe!

In his remarks Friday, and then again in his Internet and radio speech Saturday, Obama suggested that the end of direct US military involvement in Iraq was a turning point on the road to a reduction of US military actions around the world. "The tide of war is receding," he said Friday.

In his Saturday speech, Obama took note of the Iraq decision and the destruction of the Gaddafi regime in Libya—culminating in the murder of Gaddafi last week—and declared, "After a decade of war, we're turning the page and moving forward... As we end these wars, we're focusing on our greatest challenge as a nation—rebuilding our economy and renewing our strength at home."

This is a brazen lie on at least two levels. The US forces are being pulled out of Iraq only to facilitate the deployment of troops in many other countries around the world. Since Obama succeeded

George W. Bush in the White House, after running a cynically false campaign posing as an "antiwar" candidate, he has greatly expanded the scope of US military operations around the world.

Bush had US forces engaged in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan and covertly in Pakistan. Obama greatly escalated the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan and added new wars in Libya, Yemen, Somalia and now Uganda, where 100 US special forces were dispatched last week.

As for the claim that his administration is turning to "nation building" in the United States rather than in Iraq, this is mere posturing for electoral purposes. The Obama administration has worked hand-in-glove with the Republican right to slash social spending at home, even as it has increased military spending to levels far beyond those that prevailed during the Cold War.

Nor is the "withdrawal" from Iraq in any sense a pullback by the United States from the Bush doctrine of remaking the Middle East by military force. Obama has merely acted on the recognition, both in the Pentagon and in ruling class circles generally, that the US could no longer afford an open-ended military commitment on the scale of Iraq and had to find other methods to carry out its program of dominating the oil resources of the Persian Gulf and Central Asia.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who visited Afghanistan, Pakistan and several Central Asian dictatorships during the week, took the occasion of the Iraq announcement to issue a warning to Iran not to "miscalculate" on US intentions in the Middle East.

Interviewed on the Sunday talks shows, she pointed to the 50,000 US troops that will remain deployed in the region, even after a final pullout from Iraq. This includes troops stationed at bases in Turkey, Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Saudi Arabia, as well as Djibouti, just across the Red Sea from Yemen. There is also a newly established CIA base for firing drone missiles at an undisclosed location on the Arabian Peninsula.



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