

Obama's withdrawal from Iraq: Prelude to wider war

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While promoted by President Obama and his apologists as the fulfillment of a campaign promise and a turn toward peace, the US military's forced withdrawal from Iraq only sets the stage for new and bloodier conflicts.

Obama's announcement from the White House last Friday that all US troops will be out of the country before the end of the year followed Washington's inability to secure from the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki approval of legislation granting US forces blanket immunity from Iraqi law.

Such impunity is a minimal condition demanded by the Pentagon for US military deployments all over the world. However, so bitter are the experiences of the Iraqi population with a whole litany of war crimes—from the torture chambers of Abu Ghraib to the barbaric siege of Fallujah—that no major Iraqi party could afford to be identified with extending such protection to the American military.

The claim that the impending withdrawal is the fulfillment of a campaign promise goes well beyond putting a good face on a bad situation. The December 2011 withdrawal date was set not by Obama but by the Bush administration in a Status of Forces Agreement negotiated with Baghdad in 2008.

While Obama won the election in large part by posturing as an antiwar candidate, like his Republican predecessor he fully intended to renegotiate this agreement, keeping behind as many as 20,000 US troops (later scaled down to a proposal for as few as 3,000) as “trainers” and “advisers.” To that end, he sent a continuous stream of cabinet secretaries and senior US military brass to Baghdad in an arm-twisting exercise that failed.

“The tide of war is receding,” Obama declared in a flight of rhetorical fancy during his announcement last

Friday. On the contrary, the water is rising, and fast.

The eight-and-a-half-year war in Iraq, a criminal act of aggression launched on the basis of lies, has claimed the lives of over a million Iraqis together with nearly 4,500 US troops, while costing Washington over \$1 trillion. It has turned into a debacle for US imperialism, which has been unable to install a reliable puppet, has seen oil contracts go to its rivals in China and Russia, and faces growing Iranian influence over Baghdad's policies.

Yet Washington has by no means abandoned the predatory aims that led to war. The drive to war arose fundamentally out of the historic decline of American capitalism, which has only deepened with the US and world economy plunging into the greatest crisis since the Great Depression. In the attempt to offset the loss of its position as the world's top manufacturer and its previously undisputed dominance over the affairs of world capitalism, US imperialism has turned increasingly to militarism as a means of exerting hegemony over strategic regions, markets and resources.

The US is by no means leaving Iraq to its own devices. On the contrary, it is leaving in place some 16,000 US personnel, including CIA operatives and a mercenary army of some 8,000 security contractors under the control of the State Department. Meanwhile, negotiations are continuing to reach a deal with Baghdad on a military training mission.

An article by one Michael Knights, a Pentagon consultant specializing in Iraq, published by *Foreign Policy* suggests another alternative for securing American dominance. The article voices concern over the fate of the Iraqi army in the wake of the US withdrawal and the threat posed to US interests by growing Iranian influence.

Knight writes that, “for many [Iraqi] officers, the solution is another autocrat.” He quotes one as saying, “Weapons and training are needed but first politics must be fixed by a strongman, only then can an army emerge.”

Describing the army as “a sacred vessel in which Iraqi nationalism burns brightly” and the institution “least susceptible to Iranian influence,” Knight concludes: “Though the road ahead will be tough, the ties forged in battle by the US and Iraqi militaries are worth fighting for.”

Little needs to be added to turn this piece into an explicit argument for a US-backed coup to bring a new version of Saddam Hussein to power as a means of resolving the crisis created by the overthrow and murder of the old one.

Obama’s proclamations about peace being at hand were followed in short order by bellicose threats from both Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Defense Secretary Leon Panetta directed against Iran.

“Iran would be badly miscalculating if they did not look at the entire region and all of our presence in many countries in the region, both in bases [and] in training, with NATO allies, like Turkey,” Clinton told CNN last Sunday.

Panetta was even more explicit, pointing to some 40,000 US troops stationed throughout the Middle East (23,000 across the Iraqi border in Kuwait) within striking distance of Iran. “So we will always have a force that will be present and that will deal with any threats from Iran,” he said.

In the wake of Obama’s saber rattling over a bizarre “terrorist plot” that supposedly implicated Teheran, these warnings signal a further ratcheting up of US threats of military force against Iran. Washington is already campaigning to win Europe’s support for imposing sanctions on the country’s central bank, a form of economic blockade that rises to the level of an act of war.

Even more ominously, Panetta cast the impending withdrawal of US troops from Iraq as “a turning point” in the reorientation of US strategic power toward the Asia-Pacific region, directed against China.

Speaking at Yokota Air Base outside Tokyo, Panetta referred to a list of threats in Asia that he said required more attention as the US pulls its troops out of Iraq. Prominent among them was that of “rising powers,” an

allusion to Beijing.

He expounded on this theme in an opinion piece written for a Japanese newspaper, stressing that the US and Japan face a common threat from China. “China is rapidly modernizing its military,” he wrote, “but with a troubling lack of transparency, coupled with increasingly assertive activity in Asia and the Pacific.” In reality, China’s military budget is less than one-sixth that of the US.

The US wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and now Libya have been waged to assert hegemony over key oil producing regions not so much to meet America’s own needs, but rather to secure strategic advantage by controlling vital resources needed by American capitalism’s economic rivals, chief among them China. Now Washington is turning increasingly toward direct confrontation with China itself.

Thus, the debacle in Iraq has produced not a “receding tide of war,” but the threat of far greater military conflagrations.

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