

Obama and Maliki discuss continued US operations in Iraq

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President Barack Obama sought to use Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's visit to the White House to boost his re-election campaign, even as the two discussed continuing US operations in Iraq.

In remarks delivered at a joint White House press conference, Obama tried to portray the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq as his completion of a campaign promise made in 2008—when he won the presidency largely due to carefully cultivated illusions that he was an antiwar candidate who would break with the policies of then-incumbent George W. Bush.

“In the coming days, the last American soldiers will cross the border out of Iraq, with honor and with their heads held high,” Obama said. “After nearly nine years, our war in Iraq ends this month.”

Obama and his wife Michelle will both visit Fort Bragg, North Carolina for a photo-op with troops on Wednesday, while Vice President Joe Biden moved up a scheduled visit to Florida last Thursday so that he could strike a “mission accomplished” pose onboard a warship returning from the Iraq theater.

In reality, the withdrawal of virtually all US occupation troops from Iraq by December 31 is being carried out in accordance with a Status of Forces Agreement negotiated between Bush and the Maliki government in 2008.

The Obama administration and the Pentagon carried out intensive negotiations and exerted pressure on the Maliki government to amend this agreement and accept the continued deployment of up to 20,000 US troops on Iraqi soil, but failed to achieve their objectives. As of Sunday, just 6,000 US troops remained in the country, down from a peak of 170,000. Huge US bases scattered across Iraq have taken on the appearance of ghost towns.

For all the talk of “honor” and “heads held high”, the truth is that a deal could not be struck because of popular anger and hostility towards nearly nine years of war and occupation and the immense human toll it extracted from the Iraqi people: an estimated one million lives lost and millions more wounded or turned into refugees.

Washington had demanded that the regime in Baghdad renew a blanket immunity from Iraqi law for US troops carrying out crimes against Iraqi civilians. Maliki made it clear that agreeing to such conditions would represent political suicide for any Iraqi government.

NATO announced on Monday that it is withdrawing a 130-member military training team for the same reason—it cannot negotiate legal immunity for its foreign trainers.

In his opening remarks at the White House press conference Monday, Obama said that Washington would be “partnering” with the regime in Baghdad on “security”. He said he and Maliki had discussed how the US military “could help Iraq train and equip its forces—not by stationing American troops there or with US bases in Iraq—those days are over—but rather, the kind of training and assistance we offer to other countries.”

For his part, Maliki responded that Baghdad was interested in US involvement “in the area of training and the area of equipping, which is needed by the Iraqi army.” He expressed his desire for the US to approve the sale of more F-16 fighter jets to Iraq.

Asked about events in Syria, Obama and Maliki indicated a sharp divergence of positions. Obama reiterated the US policy of “regime-change”, insisting that ever-tightening sanctions and pressure must be exerted to force the fall of the Assad government.

Maliki insisted that no one had the right to demand that another country's president “abdicate” and opposed increased sanctions, citing Iraq's own experience with US aggression: “Frankly speaking, because we suffered from the blockade and the military interventions, we do not encourage a blockade because it exhausts the people and the government,” he said.

He warned that stoking a “sectarian war” in Syria could “snowball”, spreading to Iraq and destabilizing the entire region.

Touching on growing tensions between Washington and Tehran, Obama said that his administration has delivered a formal request to the Iranian government to return a US spy

drone captured by Iranian forces as it carried out surveillance operations. The Iranians recently showed the pilotless aircraft in a television broadcast.

“We have asked for it back,” Obama said at the press conference. “We’ll see how the Iranians respond.”

At a State Department news conference, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton also mentioned the request for the drone’s return, but said she was not optimistic. “Given Iran’s behavior to date we do not expect them to comply,” she said, “but we are dealing with all of these provocations and concerning actions taken by Iran in close concert with our closest allies and partners.”

In other words, Iran is the provocateur for daring to recover a US military plane sent to spy on its territory and refusing to promptly give it back. One can only imagine the response if the roles were reversed, and the US military had captured an unmanned Iranian aircraft over the United States.

While the opening question in the press conference suggested that Baghdad’s position on Syria represented the Iraqi government’s “succumbing to Iran’s influence”, Maliki chose not to take the bait. His position is emerging increasingly as one of trying to balance between Washington and Tehran, seeking arms aid from the former, while maintaining close economic and political ties with the latter.

He declared: “Clearly, we are no enemy of Iran and we do not accept that some who have problems with Iran would use us as a battlefield. Some want to fight Iran with Iraqi resources as has happened in the past. We do not allow Iran to use us against others that Iran has problems with, and we do not allow others to use us against Iran.”

Maliki is also trying to balance between the conflicting political and sectarian factions within Iraq itself, asserting ever-greater personal control over the security forces. He is not only prime minister, but also heads the defense and interior ministries, which control the army and the police forces, respectively.

An Iraqi journalist at the press conference noted that the gargantuan size of the US embassy in Baghdad has become a contentious issue in Iraq and asked if any change in US plans had been discussed.

“We don’t want to create big footprints inside of Iraq,” Obama responded. He insisted that the number of diplomatic personnel that will be assigned to Iraq will be “comparable to other countries that we think are important”, but that the overall number of Americans stationed there would be higher because of “special security needs” in Iraq—an oblique reference to the continuing daily violence. He added that the US wants to see a “very active” relationship between the two countries’ militaries.

While only 157 US military personnel and 700 Pentagon

contractors are supposed to be remaining in the country to train Iraqi forces in US-supplied weapons systems, the US State Department will direct a massive force of 16,000, which will include its own army of 5,500 armed private security contractors.

One issue that Obama and Maliki were expected to discuss is these mercenaries’ rules of engagement. The issue is contentious, given the record of security contractors’ involvement in killing and brutalizing Iraqi civilians. In particular, there is the case of the 2007 massacre of 17 unarmed Iraqis in Baghdad’s Nisour Square by Blackwater employees. The infamous security firm, which has since changed its name twice, now calling itself “Academi”, is reportedly seeking contracts in Iraq.

In addition to the 5,500 gunmen, the State Department will employ some 4,500 “general life support” contractors providing food, health care, transportation and other essential needs for diplomatic facilities that are being built as independently sustainable fortresses. The largest of them will be the US embassy in Baghdad, which occupies 104 acres in a walled facility on the Tigris River.

As for the 6,000 other “civilian” personnel, they include what will be the largest CIA station in the world along with Joint Special Operations Command troops who have been taken out of uniform.

While the US military is withdrawing from Iraq, it remains firmly entrenched in the region, with some 25,000 troops based in Kuwait—with perhaps more on the way—and tens of thousands more deployed in the Persian Gulf and in various repressive monarchical Gulf states that are being turned into bases for US intervention against Iran and more broadly in the Middle East.

Obama’s rhetoric cannot disguise the reality that US imperialism still pursues the essential aims that underlay the wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan: the military assertion of US hegemony over energy-rich and strategically vital regions of the Middle East. To that end, new wars of aggression are being prepared that will make the horrific violence inflicted upon Iraq pale by comparison.



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