No letup in US aggression following military withdrawal from Iraq

Patrick Martin
5 December 2011

The ceremonies conducted Thursday to mark the official end of the US military occupation of Iraq and the formal handover one day later of Camp Victory, the US headquarters in Baghdad, do not represent an end to military aggression by American imperialism in the Middle East. The form is changing, but not the content.

Washington launched its war of aggression against Iraq on March 20, 2003 using two false pretexts: that Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein was linked to the Al Qaeda terrorists who carried out the September 11, 2001 attacks that killed nearly 3,000 people in the United States, and that Iraq possessed stockpiles of "weapons of mass destruction" that would be supplied to Al Qaeda for further attacks.

These claims were deliberately manufactured lies, employed by the Bush administration, with the complicity of congressional Democrats, to justify the military conquest and occupation of one of the great strategic prizes in the planet—a country with the world's third-largest oil reserves, located at the head of the Persian Gulf and providing a launching pad for future US military action throughout the region.

More than eight years later, after 4,483 deaths of US soldiers and the slaughter of an estimated one million Iraqis, the most ambitious goals of US war planners and foreign policy strategists have not been realized. The hostility of the Iraqi population to the US occupation stymied efforts to exploit the country's huge oil resources and ultimately made it impossible to maintain a colonial-style puppet regime.

Despite the collaboration of the bourgeois politicians, both Shiite and Sunni, whom the US invasion brought to power, the Obama administration has been unable to revise the Status of Forces Agreement negotiated by the Bush administration in 2008. The last US soldiers, outside of a token force of Marines guarding the US Embassy, will depart Iraq before Christmas and all US military bases will be abandoned.

This made the appearance by Vice President Joseph Biden, representing the US government at the ceremonies, something less than an exercise in triumphalism, despite his claim, in an address to US soldiers and military contractors at Camp Victory, that their sacrifices had enabled the United States to "win the war."

The discussions conducted between Biden and Iraqi officials focused in large measure on ways and means of maintaining a prominent role for the US military in Iraq, under the guise of "training" Iraqi forces. Whether this takes the form of US military "trainers" rotating in and out of the country or Iraqi forces receiving training from US forces stationed in neighboring countries, where the American military presence is to be increased, appears not to have been resolved.

Biden himself personifies the right-wing, pro-war stance taken by the congressional Democrats. He voted for the war resolution in October 2002 and, in his capacity as the leading Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, backed the war and offered his own strategic advice—including a notorious proposal for the de facto partition of Iraq along ethnic and sectarian lines, which foreshadowed the policy actually employed by the US military in fomenting civil war.

The congressional Democrats shifted to a supposed "anti-war" stance only in order to co-opt and derail the mass popular opposition to the war, which propelled them to a congressional majority in 2006 and gave Obama

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victory in the 2008 presidential campaign. Once in office, however, Obama continued the Bush policy in Iraq, kept Bush's defense secretary Robert Gates at the Pentagon, and escalated Bush's other war in Afghanistan.

In his remarks at Camp Victory, Biden declared, "The tide of war is receding." Nothing could be further from the truth. American militarism has suffered a bloody nose in Iraq and is stalemated as well in Afghanistan. But there has been no change in the basic strategy of American imperialism, which is to make use of its residual superiority in military force to offset its long-term economic decline.

The formal US pullout from Iraq is part of a redeployment of US military assets in the wider region, as well as a shift in the focus of US foreign policy from southwest Asia to the Far East and the rising challenge of China. The US Central Command, which controls US operations in the Middle East and Central Asia, has more forces at its disposal today than during the heaviest days of fighting in Iraq under the Bush administration.

This includes not only the 100,000 US troops in Afghanistan—triple the number deployed under Bush—but tens of thousands of additional troops in Turkey, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman, as well as US bases in Djibouti, across the Red Sea from Yemen, and in the naval flotillas on duty in the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. The sphere of operations also includes a wide swath of north and east Africa, where the US-NATO forces overthrew and murdered Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi and US Special Forces have been deployed in Uganda and Somalia.

The most immediate target of US imperialist aggression is Iran, and all the discussions conducted by Biden during his eight-day trip through the Middle East focused on stepping up US efforts to isolate Iran economically and politically. After leaving Iraq, Biden travelled to Turkey for talks with Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan on the crisis in neighboring Syria, on a common policy in post-occupation Iraq, and on Iran, where Turkey has resisted US pressure for greater economic sanctions.

The menacing US posture towards Iran was underscored Sunday by the shooting down of an unmanned US spy plane, a remotely operated RQ-170 drone, over eastern Iran, near the Iran-Afghanistan border. Iranian officials said the spy plane, equipped with stealth technology, was now being examined by the Iranian military. US officials confirmed the loss of the drone, although they claimed it had crashed after a malfunction rather than being shot down.

In Washington, the US Senate passed by a vote of 100-0 an amendment to a defense authorization bill that greatly escalates the financial sanctions against Iran, potentially barring the central banks of China, Russia and most European countries from doing business in the United States because they do business with Iran's central bank.

The unanimous vote came despite entreaties by the Obama administration that such a move could disrupt its efforts to tighten economic sanctions against Iran—and also exacerbate the financial crisis in Europe.

The bipartisan unity in the Senate demonstrates the real position of the Democratic Party. Like the Republicans, the Democratic Party is unbreakably committed to the defense of the American financial aristocracy. Despite the occasional anti-war noises of its "left" wing and demagogues like Congressman Dennis Kucinich, the Democratic Party is one of the two parties of American imperialism.

The struggle against war and militarism requires first and foremost a break with the Democratic Party and the mobilization of American workers and youth in an independent political movement against the capitalist system, based on a socialist and internationalist program.

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