

US pushes for renewed military presence in Iraq

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The US is to begin new negotiations with the Iraqi government over a long-term defence relationship to include expanded US training and joint exercises. Washington was compelled to withdraw virtually all US troops from Iraq in December after the failure to agree on a Status of Forces Agreement to allow a permanent American military presence.

Michele Flournoy, who is retiring as US Undersecretary of Defence, told the media last Friday that Pentagon officials would be “sitting down with the Iraqis in the coming month or two” to discuss a program of exercises, training and other forms of security cooperation.

US officials told Associated Press that “they aim to establish broad defence ties to Iraq, similar to American relationships with other nations in the Gulf.” The Pentagon maintains close connections with the Gulf States, including for the basing of US military forces. Despite its withdrawal from Iraq, the US has up to 40,000 troops in the Persian Gulf, including 25,000 in Kuwait, a permanent naval base in Bahrain and access to airbases.

The Obama administration had been pressing Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki last year for more than 20,000 troops to remain in the country beyond 2011. During the US occupation of Iraq, the American military constructed major bases that allowed it to project its forces throughout the country and potentially beyond.

In the end, however, the Iraqi government refused to agree to the presence of a scaled down force of 2,000 to 3,000 American troops. The US retains a large force of

mainly private contractors to guard American officials, provide training to the Iraq military and perform other tasks. Some 5,000 are employed just to protect the 11,000 American personnel who staff the huge US embassy in Baghdad.

Iraq’s refusal to allow a permanent US military presence was a setback for the Obama administration as it prepared for a confrontation with neighbouring Iran. The decision led to accusations in the American media that Maliki’s dominant Shiite coalition was doing Tehran’s bidding. A major political crisis erupted in Baghdad, which the US and its allies Turkey and Saudi Arabia undoubtedly had a hand in fomenting.

As the final US troops prepared to pull out, the Sunni-based Iraqiya bloc intensified its demands for a greater say in the “national unity” government, accusing Maliki of breaching an agreement to put led Iraqiya leader Ayad Allawi in charge of the main security ministries. Allawi, a long-time CIA asset, was installed by Washington as Iraq’s interim prime minister in 2004. Turkey and Saudi Arabia provided funds to Iraqiya for its 2010 election campaign.

Maliki responded by arresting hundreds of former Baath Party members, including ex-military officers and figures connected to Iraqiya. Charges were brought against Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi for allegedly directing a sectarian death squad. He denied the accusation and fled to the autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq, where the government has rejected demands to hand him over to Baghdad.

In protest at Maliki’s actions, Iraqiya pulled its ministers out of the national unity government and

boycottd parliament. Exchanges became increasingly heated as Maliki accused his opponents of “terrorism,” while Iraqiya leaders denounced the prime minister as a new dictator. The sectarian tensions were accompanied by a marked escalation of bombings and other attacks, particularly against ordinary Shiites.

According to security officials, 434 Iraqis have been killed in attacks across the country since the last US troops pulled out in mid-December. A major bombing occurred last Friday when a car exploded near a funeral procession in a Baghdad Shiite neighbourhood, killing 31 people, including 8 police officers, and wounding another 60.

The eruption of sectarian tensions in Iraq took place as the Obama administration imposed potentially crippling economic sanctions on Iran and threatened military action against any Iranian attempt to close the Strait of Hormuz in retaliation. At the same time, the US and its allies sought to weaken or remove regimes allied to Tehran, such as the Syrian government of President Bashar al Assad.

Turkey intensified the pressure on the Iraqi government last week when Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan accused Maliki of encouraging violence against Sunnis in Iraq and warned that it would be “impossible for us to remain silent.” He was responding to Maliki’s complaints that Turkey had been interfering in Iraq’s internal politics.

In this context, Iraq’s decision to engage in talks with the Pentagon is not coincidental. By indicating that his government was open to closer military ties with the US, Maliki was signalling to Washington that he would not side with Iran in the current confrontation. The Iranian regime has been hostile to the stationing of US troops in Iraq, not least because it can be used as a base to infiltrate Iran.

The Obama administration appears to have understood the message. Vice President Joe Biden spoke to Allawi on Friday and to parliamentary speaker Osama Nufaifi, also a senior Iraqiya figure, on Saturday, urging them to return to parliament to lay the basis for a national reconciliation conference. US

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made a similar appeal last Thursday urging Iraqi leaders not to “blow this opportunity” to “have a unified Iraq.”

Iraqiya leaders announced on Sunday that they would end their boycott and their lawmakers took their seats when parliament reconvened on Tuesday. Iraqiya ministers have not rejoined the cabinet, however. The political standoff continues and could rapidly intensify. The charges against Hashemi have not been withdrawn and Allawi is calling for Maliki to be replaced or fresh elections to be called.

Iraqiya’s return to parliament was not solely at Biden’s bidding, but was conditioned by its own venal calculations. The budget is due to be approved during this parliamentary session and Iraqiya is seeking to ensure its constituents are taken care of. Iraqiya also ended its boycott in part to stem a series of defections from the party.

Having pressured Maliki to open talks on military ties, the US now wants an easing of sectarian tensions—for the time being at least—so that it can extract concessions from the Baghdad government.



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