

150,000 US troops to remain in Iraq for another three years

Iraq cabinet passes US forces pact

By [Global Research](#)

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Iraq's cabinet has approved a security pact which allows about 150,000 US troops to remain in the country for another three years, a government spokesman has confirmed.

The draft Status of Forces Agreement (Sofa) was passed by the cabinet on Sunday and will now be sent to parliament for their approval.

All but one of the 28 cabinet members present in the session voted in favour of the deal, Ali al-Dabbagh, Iraqi government spokesman, said.

"There was a positive position taken on the part of the larger blocs and all the most important blocs," Dabbagh said.

"They all expressed a positive position because they consider it the best [agreement] possible, because it will manage and end the military presence and guarantee the complete withdrawal of the troops."

However, it is not clear why nine members of the 37-member cabinet stayed away from the meeting.

On Sunday, the White House welcomed as a "positive step" Iraq's cabinet approving an agreement allowing US troops to stay until 2011.

"While the process is not yet complete, we remain hopeful and confident we'll soon have an agreement that serves both the people of Iraq and the United States well and sends a signal to the region and the world that both our governments are committed to a stable, secure and democratic Iraq," Gordon Johndroe, the White House spokesman, said.

Diyala blast

Shortly after the security pact was passed, a suicide car bombing at a police checkpoint in Diyala province killed at least 15 people, including seven police officers, security officials said.

Hassan al-Kurawi, a police major, said 20 people were also wounded in the attack, which took place east of the provincial capital of Baquba.

Earlier, three people died after a homemade explosive device went off near a checkpoint in Baghdad, police said.

The security agreement, which has undergone a series of revisions during months of wrangling and opposition from many ordinary Iraqis, now sets 2011 as a fixed deadline for US forces to leave Iraq.

Hoda Abdel Hamid, Al Jazeera's Iraq correspondent, said that most Iraqis she had spoken to were ambivalent about extending the presence of US troops in their country.

"On one hand everyone wants to see the last US soldier leave Iraq, but on the other hand they are afraid of what could happen if there is a hasty withdrawal," she said.

Hoshyar Zebari, Iraq's foreign minister, said he expected the deal to be passed by parliament before the end of the month.

The rule of law over US troops and civilian contractors on Iraqi soil has been behind most of the differences over the draft of the deal.

Previous drafts of the agreement have only agreed that US troops can be held accountable under Iraqi law for any crimes committed outside their bases while off duty.

Baghdad has also sought to ensure that the US military does not use Iraqi territory as a base to launch attacks on neighbouring countries.

Opposition protests

Many Iraqis have openly protested against the security deal with Washington, with thousands of people turning up at a recent opposition rally organised by Muqtada al-Sadr, an Iraqi Shia leader.

Although the cabinet has approved the draft, the fact that most parliament members have not seen the text could delay their passage of the accord, our correspondent said.

"I think we are going to hear a lot of deliberation in parliament and we will see a lot of procrastination. The Sadrists are in the parliament as well as other groups who are also against the pact ... there is going to be a lot of in-fighting," she said.

"Most of the parliament has not read this agreement. One of the main issues is that no-one in Iraq except the cabinet has read it."

Ahead of the vote, Nuri al-Maliki, the Iraqi prime minister, dispatched Khalid al-Attiyah and Ali al-Adeeb, two senior Shia legislators to Najaf to secure the support of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the country's top Shia cleric.

The Associated Press quoted a senior official at al-Sistani's office as saying the cleric told the prime minister's emissaries that the draft document represented "the best available option" for Iraq, signalling that he would not object to it if the cabinet and parliament approve it.

The Iranian-born al-Sistani commands enormous influence with Iraq's Shia majority.

The UN mandate covering the presence of US forces in Iraq expires on December 31, and failure to pass the security agreement would leave Iraq with little choice but to seek a

renewal of the mandate.

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