

Obama's Iraq withdrawal plan sets stage for continued war

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In his first address to a joint session of Congress Tuesday night, President Barack Obama promised that he would “soon announce a way forward in Iraq that leaves Iraq to its people and responsibly ends this war.”

The US president offered no details about his plan. Subsequent leaks from within the administration and the Pentagon, however, have made it clear that, as with so much of his high-flown but ambiguous rhetoric, the vagueness was deliberately crafted to mask a lie—or in this case, two lies.

Obama's plan will neither end the war nor “leave Iraq to its people.”

Vice President Joseph Biden indicated Wednesday that Obama would issue a formal announcement on Friday. There are reports that he will travel to the Marine Corps' Camp Lejeune or the Army's Fort Bragg, both in North Carolina, to unveil the plan.

According to unnamed administration officials and senior military officers quoted in various media reports Wednesday, the Obama plan calls for withdrawing all US “combat troops” in 19 months, with the last of them out of Iraq in August 2010.

“Combat troops” is for the military a term of art. Citing two unnamed administration officials, the Associated Press reported: “The US military would leave behind a residual force, between 30,000 and 50,000 troops, to continue advising and training Iraqi security forces. Also staying beyond the 19 months would be intelligence and surveillance specialists and their equipment, including unmanned aircraft.”

Moreover, it appears that “combat troops” may remain in Iraq with the Pentagon merely changing their designation to support units. The New York Times quoted military officials as saying that “they did not know how many combat troops would stay behind in new missions as trainers, advisers or counterterrorism forces, at least some of whom would still be effectively in combat roles.”

The Times continued: “Military planners have said that in order to meet withdrawal deadlines, they would reassign some combat troops to training and support of the Iraqis, even though the troops would still be armed and go on combat patrols with their Iraqi counterparts.”

The Los Angeles Times quoted a senior military officer who seemed to suggest that the withdrawal timetable was really of secondary importance.

“The thing I would pay attention to is what will remain,” said the officer. “The key decision for the president is: what is that force and what specific duties does it have?”

The officer added, “When President Obama said we were going to get out within 16 months, some people heard ‘get out’ and everyone’s gone. But that is not going to happen.”

The time frame for even the limited withdrawal is three months longer than the 16 months that Obama promised during the 2008 campaign, an apparent concession to opposition from Defense Secretary Robert Gates; Gen. David Petraeus, the Central Command chief; and Gen. Ray Odierno, the senior commander in Iraq, who sought to keep a large force longer in Iraq.

All three of these figures were placed in their positions by the Bush administration and are identified with the military “surge” that saw a US military escalation in Iraq and an increase of troop levels by 30,000, beginning in 2007.

In retaining both Gates and the military commanders, Obama has assured an essential continuity with the overall militarist strategy that was developed under the Bush administration.

In an important tactical change, it has opted for its own surge in Afghanistan, having announced the decision to send an additional 17,000 troops to combat the insurgency in that country. This deployment is seen as only the first installment on what will be a major escalation.

The drawing down of US forces in Iraq is being driven in no small measure by the ratcheting up of the US intervention in Afghanistan. Two of the brigades that are being sent to Afghanistan had previously been slated for deployment in Iraq.

Yet, as the Obama administration escalates the war in Afghanistan, while increasingly extending the intervention in the region across the border into Pakistan, the occupation and the killing in Iraq will go on. That is the real significance of Obama’s plan.

Even as the administration prepared to announce its plan, four more US troops died in Iraq, three killed by insurgents in Diyala province Monday and another shot to death by uniformed Iraqi policemen in Mosul on Tuesday. In the second incident, an Iraqi interpreter was also killed, while three US soldiers and a second interpreter were wounded.

The mission of the US military left behind in Iraq will not be confined merely to training, protection of US interests and “anti-terrorism” operations. With a continued monopoly over air power and heavy artillery in the country, it will remain the dominant force, with the Iraqi army functioning essentially as a US puppet force.

The essential mission of the US troops, whether they number 50,000 or more, will remain the one they were given with the invasion of Iraq nearly six years ago—the neo-colonial subjugation of one of the most oil-rich nations on the planet.

The Obama administration continues to pursue this goal—albeit by somewhat altered means. Its aim, like the Bush administration before it, is to secure a strategic advantage over US imperialism’s principal economic rivals in Europe and Asia by establishing hegemony over key energy supplies upon which they depend.

Liberal supporters of Obama have sought to comfort themselves and deflect criticism by arguing that the 19-month withdrawal plan about to be announced represents only a three-month deviation from the timetable he advanced during the 2008 election campaign, and that he had always included the proposal for the “residual force” remaining in Iraq.

Such legalistic arguments evade the central issue. In election after election—2002, 2004, 2006 and 2008—the American people have been defrauded, denied the right to cast any real vote on the war in Iraq. Time after time, the Democrats have colluded with the Republicans to assure that the act of military aggression that both parties approved and sustained could not be challenged by the electorate. The millions upon millions of voters who wanted an end to the war have been effectively disenfranchised.

This process culminated in the 2008 election itself, in which Obama’s capture of the Democratic nomination was unquestionably driven in large measure by his attempt to identify himself with these broad antiwar sentiments and to pillory his principal Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton, for her October 2002 vote authorizing the war.

Now Clinton serves as his secretary of state, while Bush’s appointee Gates still heads the Pentagon.

The emergence of the Obama administration’s policy of continued occupation in Iraq and escalation of the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan only underscores the bankruptcy of the American democratic process. It is impossible under the present two-party system for the voters to exert their influence on war or any other essential question.

Obama’s policies are being determined not by the popular hostility to war felt by the millions who voted for him, but by the financial and strategic interests of the America’s corporate and financial elite. He has emerged more and more openly as a mouthpiece for finance capital and the military.

The struggle against war cannot be advanced within the confines of the existing political institutions and the two-party monopoly exercised by the banks and big business.

It requires first and foremost an irrevocable break with the Democratic Party and the independent political mobilization of working people against the profit system, which gives rise to militarism and war. This means building the Socialist Equality Party and fighting to win the broadest layers of workers, students and young people to its socialist and internationalist program.

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