

Will Obama Vacate Iraq?

Combat troops to be re-labelled 'transitional forces'

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On February 27, 2009 President Barack Obama delivered his much-anticipated policy speech on Iraq. The important point in his announcement was the withdrawal of some U.S. troops from Iraq by August 31, 2010. However, it did not mean an end to the American occupation of Iraq, or an end to an illegal genocidal war that the Bush-Cheney administration had started. Despite his high-blown rhetoric about withdrawing from Iraq, Obama did not deal with many important questions. Thus what was not said cannot be regarded as an oversight but rather as an indication of how the new administration intends to pursue its policy objectives. Those who had wished to see a break by the new administration with the Bush-Cheney administration's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are concerned because they detect the continuation of the goal of the U.S. domination, which the American rulers usually refer to as the 'U.S. interests' in the region.

At present the U.S. has 142,000 combat troops in Iraq. But what is often glossed over is the fact that there is almost a parallel army of American mercenaries and private military contractors whose numbers range from 100,000 to 150,000. Thus both the regular fighting force and these mercenaries are virtual foreign occupiers. However, the planned withdrawal of U.S. troops will not amount to ending the U.S. occupation of Iraq. Obama wants to keep more than 50,000 occupying troops in Iraq. His innovation, if we can call it so, lies in classifying them as 'non-combat' troops or a 'transitional force'. And what will they be doing? It is worth noticing how Obama formulates the policy objective that shows the real intentions of the occupiers: 'we will retain a transitional force to carry out the three distinct functions: training, equipping, and advising Iraqi Security Forces as long as they remain non-sectarian; conducting targeted counterterrorism missions; and protecting our ongoing civilian and military efforts within Iraq.'

So, instead of 'combat brigades', the re-labelled 'transitional force' will carry on the 'targeted counterterrorism missions'! This cannot fool anyone. What this in effect means is that that the 50,000 soldiers will continue to accomplish the 'mission' that the former U.S. president George W. Bush had laid out for them.

President Obama has plans to remove all such remaining U.S. troops from Iraq by the end of 2011. But things are far from certain. What will happen if the resistance against the occupier and its puppet regime in Baghdad continues and the U.S. policy-makers and military planners conclude that the challenge to American hegemony and its geopolitical interests in Iraq persists? In that case, this plan can be replaced with a new one neatly drafted by the Pentagon. Such concern was aired by the NBC's Pentagon's correspondent Jim Miklaszewski on February 27, 2009 that 'military commanders, despite their Status of Forces agreement with the Iraqi government that all U.S. forces would be out by the end of

2011, are already making plans for a significant number of troops to remain in Iraq beyond that 2011 deadline, assuming that the Status of Forces Agreement would be renegotiated. And one senior military commander told us that he expects large number of American troops to be in Iraq for the next 15 to 20 years.' In case of such need to keep the American forces in Iraq, the puppet regime in Baghdad will hardly be in a position to resist the American diktat and pressure. That means the colonial occupation of Iraq according to U.S. designs and interests will continue.

There are a number of important issues that President Obama did not touch in his speech. What will happen to more than 100,000 mercenaries and private military contractors operating in Iraq? These companies have been used by the American military and they have been immune to any accountability for killing Iraqis. The recent change of name from Blackwater to 'Xe' does not change the mission of the mercenaries and their crimes in Iraq. Again, the ultimate responsibility for the actions of such people lies with the American government. The peace movement should demand the Obama administration to redress the issue.

In Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone, the Bush administration built the largest embassy of any nation anywhere on Earth, a sprawling complex of buildings to accommodate up to 5,000 American diplomats and officials. That shows what long-term objectives the Bush administration had for Iraq and the Middle East. Besides, it was again the illegal action of the occupying military power in which the people of Iraq had no say. An embassy is meant for diplomatic relations between two states. But the gigantic building to accommodate thousands of officials in the capital of an occupied oil-rich country shows the true intentions of the American rulers. These buildings should be closed down or handed over to the Iraqis.

The United States has 58 permanent military bases in Iraq, as a part of the larger network of American military bases around the world. President Obama should give a clear indication that when the American troops are withdrawn, the illegal use of Iraqi military bases will also come to an end.

Let us hope that President Obama's words match his actions; actions that will signify a change in the direction of American imperial policy. It was encouraging to see that when he turned to the Iraqi people and said: 'The United States pursues no claim on your territory or your resources. We respect your sovereignty and the tremendous sacrifices you have made for your country. We seek a full transition to Iraqi responsibility for the security of your country.'

The American rulers have inflicted immeasurable death and destruction on the Iraqi people and the infrastructure of their country. They have caused untold humanitarian disaster and suffering in Iraq. The people of Iraq have seen only death, destruction and barbarity at the hands of the occupiers since the U.S. invasion of their country. The Belgian philosopher, Lieven De Caeter, the initiator of the BRussells Tribunal, writes: 'During six years of occupation, 1.2 million citizens were killed, 2,000 doctors killed, and 5,500 academics and intellectuals assassinated or imprisoned. There are 4.7 million refugees: 207 million inside the country and two million have fled to neighbouring countries, among which are 20,000 doctors. According to the Red Cross, Iraq is a country of widows and orphans: two million widows as a consequence of war, embargo, and war again and occupation, and five million orphans, many of whom are homeless (estimated at 500,000).'

For us the ordinary human beings, such a degree of inhumanity shown by the rulers of the United States towards the people of a great country and callous imperviousness to the suffering of so many people is hard to understand. In addition, Iraq, the cradle of human civilisation eventually fell in the hands of the American occupiers and they vandalized the ancient treasures and artifacts, which were the common heritage of all humanity.

In sum, the peace movement should demand the complete withdrawal of all U.S. troops, the withdrawal of all mercenaries and military contractors hired by the Pentagon. All American military bases in Iraq should be closed and the full sovereignty of Iraq over its land and air be respected. All lucrative oil contracts the occupiers made with the puppet regime in Baghdad should be held null and void. Above all, the United States should be held accountable to pay reparations for the damage it caused and pay compensation to the victims of aggression. We should demand that the International Criminal Court takes steps to indict the alleged war criminals. The governments of the United States and Britain have a special responsibility to hand over the principal war criminals to The Hague and to facilitate the task of such trials.

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