

After wave of attacks, US signals troops could stay in Iraq

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After a string of deadly bombings and shootings in Iraq Monday, the Obama administration again indicated its willingness to keep US troops in the country after a December 31 deadline for their withdrawal.

Monday's attacks produced the country's largest single-day death toll in over a year, with at least 89 people killed and 315 wounded. The wave of bombings and shootings included 42 separate attacks carried out in 12 separate cities. The coordinated attacks struck at Iraqi security forces in Sunni areas, including Ramadi, where a roadside bomb killed three policemen and wounded two others, and Tikrit, where suicide bombers attacked an Iraqi counterterrorism unit, killing three of its members. In Baquba, gunmen using weapons with silencers struck at a group of Iraqi Army officers, killing five.

In another attack, men dressed in army uniforms entered a mosque outside of Baghdad and read out names from a list of individuals who had been part of the "Awakening Council," a militia movement promoted by the US occupation as a means of suppressing resistance. The gunmen dragged seven people out of the mosque, killing four of them and severely wounding three others. Iraqi officials said that a note was left near their bodies identifying the attackers as members of the Islamic State of Iraq.

The bloodiest toll took place in the predominantly Shiite city of Kut, where a pair of explosions in the market area killed 40 people. Attacks also took place in the Shiite holy cities of Najaf and Karbala.

Iraqi officials have blamed the attacks on Al Qaeda, though the term is used loosely in Iraq as elsewhere to refer to Sunni insurgents.

The White House condemned the attacks and, speaking at a forum at the National Defense University in Washington, both Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta signaled that the Obama administration is prepared to revise its troop withdrawal schedule.

Clinton, who speculated that the wave of bombings "could very well be Al-Qaeda in Iraq trying to reassert itself," said that if the Iraqi regime of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki were to ask for American forces to remain in the country, "it would be irresponsible for us not to listen."

For his part, Panetta declared, "We are going to maintain a long-term relationship with Iraq to make sure they remain stable, whether it's diplomatic or military." He added that the continued deployment of US troops in the country for troop training and

"counter-terrorism" operations could be negotiated between the two governments.

Under a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) negotiated between the Bush administration and the Iraqi regime, all 48,000 US troops remaining in Iraq are to be withdrawn by the end of this year.

Earlier this month, under pressure from the Obama administration and the Pentagon, the Iraqi parliament authorized negotiations with Washington on extending the US military presence, supposedly in the guise of "trainers" and "advisers." US officials have reported that Washington envisions keeping some 10,000 US troops on the ground in Iraq indefinitely, including special operations units which would continue "kill or capture" missions against suspected insurgents.

Maliki's Shiite-based Da'wa Party and the largely Sunni-based Iraqiya party headed by Iyad Allawi, a secular Shiite and former CIA "asset," have backed negotiations on extending the US military occupation. However, the continued presence of American troops is widely opposed by the Iraqi people, some 1.2 million of whom lost their lives, with millions more turned into refugees, as a result of the 2003 US invasion and eight years of occupation.

This popular hostility has found distorted reflection within Maliki's unstable coalition government. Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi, for example, issued a statement last weekend warning that a continuation of the US occupation would represent "a problem not a solution."

"The withdrawal of American combat forces will lead to an improvement in the security situation in Iraq by calming the concerns of neighboring countries that felt threatened," he said.

Hashemi also said that the Iraqi government had no need to renegotiate the US withdrawal agreement in order to secure training, arms and equipment for its security forces.

"I hope in the near future, Iraq will be open to Russia, southeast Asia and the European Union," he said. "There are many countries that have technology which is comparable to what is available in the US, and this technology competes with American technology at lower prices."

Hashemi's mention of "concerns of neighboring countries" about the US presence was obviously referring to Iran, which has countered the US attempt to dominate Iraqi affairs by wielding increasing political and economic influence of its own.

The radical Shiite cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr, who has close ties to the Iranian clerical establishment, has roundly condemned the negotiations on extending the US military presence and warned

that American troops remaining in the country after December 31 would be seen as a target for attack. “They will be treated as anyone who stays in Iraq, as a tyrannical occupier that must be resisted by military means,” al-Sadr said in a statement posted on his web site.

Al-Sadr also issued a letter in English directed to US troops, urging them all to leave. “If you claim you have come to free us, spare us your claims and release us of your wrongdoing,” he wrote. “Know that we will resist and struggle firmly and strongly as before, until you leave our land, even as you would resist and struggle if your country were exposed to invasion.”

While al-Sadr’s parliamentary faction has opposed any renegotiation of the SOFA and walked out of parliament when the vote was taken to open negotiations, it remains part of the Maliki government, holding a number of ministerial posts. The militant rhetoric against the continuation of the US occupation is solely for the Sadrist movement’s political base among the more oppressed sections of the working class in the sprawling Baghdad slum of Sadr City as well as in cities in Iraq’s Shiite south.

While Monday’s bloody wave of attacks was attributed to Sunni forces, the US military has blamed Shiite militias for a string of attacks aimed at American forces. Fifteen American troops were killed in June and another five in July.

Last Sunday, Camp Delta, the huge US military base outside of the southern city of Kut, came under Katyusha rocket attack, though no casualties were reported. Camp Delta, which occupies some 37 square miles, is the sole remaining US base yet to be formally turned over to Iraqi control. Located near a main Iranian border crossing, the camp boasts a long runway as well as housing for more than 6,000 troops and has seen tens of millions of dollars of new construction since the SOFA providing for a US withdrawal was reached.

The day after Monday’s attacks attributed to Sunni militants, a spokesman for the US military occupation affirmed that the Pentagon sees Shiite militias, allegedly backed by Iran, as the greater threat in Iraq.

Maj. Gen. Jeffrey Buchanan, the chief US military spokesman in Iraq, told Pentagon reporters Tuesday that Iran’s Quds force is providing support to the Shiite militias “in terms of manning, equipping, provision of intelligence.” He charged that Iran’s aim was to “keep Iraq weak and isolated from everybody else, all of its neighbors and the United States.”

The general’s analysis says at least as much about US aims as it does about Iran. Washington is determined to continue pursuing the aims that motivated the invasion of 2003: domination of Iraq and its oil wealth and the use of Iraqi territory to project US military power throughout the region. Increasingly, US control over Iraq has been severely undermined by Iran’s substantial influence as well as by growing economic interests of other powers, including Turkey and China.

This is why the Pentagon and the Obama administration—Obama’s campaign pledges about ending the US war in Iraq notwithstanding—are determined to maintain a military grip over the country.

Whether or not the Maliki government is able to secure a negotiated deal for extending the stay of US troops, Washington

has worked to assure itself a continued military role. In eight years of occupation, the US has deliberately limited the capacities of the Iraqi military, leaving it without an air force or a navy and consequently the ability to protect the country’s borders. US air power will continue to control the Iraqi skies no matter what decision is taken by Iraq’s parliament.

Meanwhile, as part of the preparation for US military withdrawal, the US State Department is conducting an ever-increasing militarization of its own operations in Iraq, which are expected to see the continued deployment of some 17,000 US “civilians” organized around the largest embassy in the world. Included in this number will be at least 5,000 heavily armed US military contractors, backed by a fleet of attack helicopters operated by DynCorp International.

The *Washington Post*’s Walter Pincus reported Tuesday that the Pentagon has shifted an Army contract for intelligence services to the State Department so that US military intelligence operations can continue unabated in the event the scheduled troop withdrawal goes forward. While the precise nature of the services provided under the contract have been kept secret by the Pentagon, the document outlining its transfer to the State Department says that the contractor, L-3 Communications, will “assist in all aspect of intelligence support activities in order to provide timely and actionable intelligence information.”

Pincus quotes the original contract, signed in 2009, which states that L-3 was hired to supply US-led military forces in Iraq with “intelligence operations support, locally employed persons screening, special security officers, human intelligence support teams, information operations support, and intelligence support.”

The implication is that the State Department and its military contractors will be continuing operations previously carried out by the US military, including, in all likelihood, counterinsurgency operations coordinated with Iraqi Army units.



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