

Washington demands permanent bases to repress Iraqis, launch new Middle East wars

By Bill Van Auken
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The United States is demanding that Iraq grant it the authority to establish 50 permanent military bases scattered across the country, as well as other sweeping powers that would extend the present US military occupation indefinitely and formalize the country's status as an American semi-colony.

Details of the terms being negotiated between US officials and the Iraqi puppet regime of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki on a Status of Force Agreement (SOFA) covering the continued presence of US occupation troops in the country emerged this week from several sources.

Hassan Al-Sunaid, an Iraqi member of parliament from Maliki's Dawa Party, told the Iraqi state TV channel "al-Iraqiya" Wednesday that the draft agreement presented by Washington includes the building of the 50 bases as well as Iraq's ceding control of its airspace to American forces. It likewise allows US forces to launch military operations without any prior consultation, much less permission, from the Iraqi regime, the lawmaker said.

Writing in the British daily the *Independent* Thursday, veteran Middle East correspondent Patrick Cockburn cited Iraqi sources affirming that the deal would allow US troops to "occupy permanent bases, conduct military operations, arrest Iraqis and enjoy immunity from Iraqi law."

An Iraqi source quoted by Cockburn dismissed Washington's repeated disavowal of any desire for permanent bases in Iraq. "This is just a tactical subterfuge," he said.

Cockburn reported that the deal would give the US military the continued right to arrest Iraqis and imprison them indefinitely without charges. Tens of thousands remain in US custody.

In addition to the military, US private contractors would also enjoy full immunity, he added. Given that mercenary forces like those employed by Blackwater are also exempt from military justice, the immunity gives them an unrestricted license to kill.

Meanwhile, citing "senior Iraqi military sources," the *Gulf News* reported Thursday that the US-Iraqi security agreement proposed by Washington would also include "the right for the United States to strike, from within Iraqi territory, any country it considers a threat to its national security."

Gulf News adds, citing the same sources, that under the proposed agreement "Iraqi security institutions such as Defense, Interior and National Security ministries, as well as armament contracts, will be under American supervision for ten years."

The report quoted one Iraqi military source with detailed information on the proposed US bases. He told the newspaper: "According to this agreement, the American forces will keep permanent military bases on Iraqi territory, and these will include Al

Asad Military base in the Baghdadi area close to the Syrian border, Balad military base in northern Baghdad close to Iran, Habbaniyah base close to the town of Fallujah and the Ali Bin Abi Talib military base in the southern province of Nasiriyah close to the Iranian border."

The sources reported that US occupation forces are now engaged in building the bases and constructing runways for US warplanes. They added that, while existing bases in Kirkuk and Mosul were supposed to be closed down in three years, Washington is pressuring the regime in Baghdad to grant it permanent control of the Kirkuk base.

According to some estimates, the US is spending upwards of \$1 billion a year on base construction in Iraq. The Pentagon has also transferred much of the military infrastructure that it previously maintained in Saudi Arabia to Iraqi soil.

As part of the basing plan, the *Gulf News* added, British forces would remain stationed at the international airport in the southern city of Basra for at least another 10 years.

The secret pact that Washington is attempting to impose upon Iraq is being described by the Bush administration as a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), the likes of which the US has concluded with scores of other countries where the American military has bases. Alongside this agreement, the administration is simultaneously negotiating what it has termed a "Strategic Framework," though US officials have failed to spell out what this second deal would entail.

The administration is pressing for the Iraqi regime to sign the entire package by the end of next month. Presently, US forces are operating under the fig leaf of a resolution that the United Nations Security Council passed in May 2003, bowing to the US war of aggression. While granting ostensible legitimacy to the US occupation, the resolution had to be renewed each year.

The Iraqi regime requested that 2008 be the final year, with the UN mandate set to expire on December 31, revoking the international body's formal definition of the country as "a threat to international peace and security," and removing Washington's flimsy claim to international sanction for its predatory enterprise.

The details that have surfaced in regard to the secret negotiations have unleashed a wave of criticism and outrage in Iraq itself. Tens of thousands are expected to take to the streets again today in the second weekly protest called by the political movement led by Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, who has called for a repudiation of the pact and demanded that it be submitted to a popular referendum.

Others closer to the US-backed regime of Maliki have also come out in opposition to the US proposal, underscoring the depth of Iraqi anger over Washington's demands.

A letter released June 4, 2008 and signed by members of the Iraqi

parliament representing the political parties controlling more than half the seats in the legislature declared that “the majority of Iraqi representatives strongly reject any military-security, economic, commercial, agricultural, investment or political agreement with the United States that is not linked to clear mechanisms that obligate the occupying American military forces to fully withdraw from Iraq, in accordance with a declared timetable and without leaving behind any military bases, soldiers or hired fighters.”

The letter was read out Wednesday at a hearing of a House Foreign Affairs subcommittee, where two members of the Iraqi parliament testified in opposition to the secret pact. One of them, Professor Nadeem al-Jaberi, a Shia legislator from Baghdad, warned that the Iraqi regime lacked any real power to defend the country’s sovereignty in the negotiations under conditions in which it remains occupied by over 150,000 US troops. He estimated that approximately 70 percent of the Iraqi public wants US troops withdrawn from the country.

“We believe that for any bilateral agreement to be signed it would be better it would be done after the withdrawal of American troops, when Iraq is fully qualified and when the Iraqi government is in a position to defend the interests of the Iraqi people,” said Jaberi.

The second Iraqi parliament member, Sheikh Khalaf al-Ulwayan, from Sunni al-Anbar province, called for a postponement of any negotiations until after the Bush administration leaves office and insisted that the US military presence in Iraq must end.

Following their testimony, right-wing California Republican Rep. Dana Rohrabacher attempted to badger Ulayyan, demanding to know whether he wished the United States had not invaded Iraq and overthrown Saddam Hussein.

“We prefer [that] it [wouldn’t have] happened,” he replied, “because this led to the destruction of the country.”

Rohrabacher pressed on: “OK, so you would have preferred the US not to have gone in and got rid of Saddam Hussein?”

Ulayyan responded, “The United States got rid of one person but they brought hundreds of persons who are worse than Saddam.”

In a comment also published Thursday in the *Independent*, Ali Allawi, who served as finance minister in the so-called Iraqi transitional government in 2005 and 2006, spelled out the roots of this mass popular opposition in the historical legacy of the Iraqi people’s struggle against colonialism.

Allawi compared the pact sought by Washington to the 1930 Anglo-Iraqi pact imposed by Britain as the price for Iraq’s formal independence. Like the terms envisioned by the US, the pact granted Britain military bases, effective control over Iraqi security forces, and domination over the country’s oil.

“The treaty was ratified by a docile Iraqi parliament, but was bitterly resented by nationalists,” Allawi writes. “Iraq’s dependency on Britain poisoned Iraqi politics for the next quarter of a century. Riots, civil disturbances, uprisings and coups were all a feature of Iraq’s political landscape, prompted in no small measure by the bitter disputations over the treaty with Britain.”

He described the proposed Status of Force and Strategic Alliance deals as “a reprise of that treaty, but this time with the US, rather than Britain, as the dominant foreign partner.”

Allawi added that President George W. Bush is determined to impose the deal in order to “salvage his Iraq expedition by claiming that Iraq is now pacified and is a loyal American ally in the Middle East and the War on Terror.”

Having reached a tentative agreement during a videoconference

with Bush last November to move forward with the permanent occupation pact, even Maliki and his puppet government have been compelled to backtrack on the deal in the face of mass opposition.

The London-based, Arabic-language daily *Asharq Al-Awsat* quoted Iraqi government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh as saying, “Currently, there is open talk on the need to look for alternatives to the long-term security agreement between Iraq and the United States.”

Al-Dabbagh added, “The Iraqi Government’s vision differs from that of the Americans who think that the agreement will give them almost totally a free hand in Iraq and that, as a military force, they must have absolute powers. This stand contravenes Iraqi sovereignty and our people’s rights. No Iraqi political force or party would accept this.”

It appears that the Maliki regime is seeking to deflect mass anger by proposing to continue the US occupation—upon which its own political survival depends—by other means. These could include either extending once again the UN mandate or classifying the US bases and continued military presence as “temporary” and subject to annual review.

According to *Asharq Al-Awsat*, Iraqi negotiators have also called for the restriction of US military operations to those approved in writing by the Iraqi government and of the immunity of US troops to actions carried out in such approved operations.

With barely seven months left in office, the Bush administration is attempting to salvage its imperialist project in Iraq by laying the foundations for a permanent colonial-style occupation. Its aims are to secure a military stranglehold over the country’s oil wealth and to utilize its territory as a base of operations for further military aggression throughout the region.

Despite sharp tactical differences over how to go forward with the Iraq war, there is a general consensus within the American ruling elite that some form of US presence must continue indefinitely, to achieve the original aim of the illegal US invasion: US hegemony over the oil-rich Persian Gulf.

While the Republican presidential candidate, Senator John McCain, has declared his support for a US occupation in Iraq that could continue for a century, the Democratic candidate, Senator Barack Obama, has indicated that his proposed “withdrawal” from Iraq would leave tens of thousands of US troops behind to protect the interests of the American ruling elite in Iraq and the wider region.

The difficulties that have surfaced in the Bush administration’s negotiation of the Iraqi Status of Force Agreement are a reflection of a growing opposition to the US occupation among the masses of people, both in Iraq and in the US itself. It is the independent political intervention of the masses in both countries that will ultimately spell an end to this criminal colonial enterprise.

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