

The Iraq withdrawal and the continuing eruption of US militarism

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The White House has used the imminent withdrawal of all but a handful of US troops from Iraq to promote Barack Obama's reelection campaign. The president's strategists are conducting a cynical propaganda operation aimed at simultaneously identifying him with the military and pushing the claim that the pullout is a fulfillment of his 2008 campaign promises.

The president used the visit of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to the White House Monday to proclaim, "After nearly nine years, our war in Iraq ends this month." Today, he and his wife Michelle fly to Fort Bragg, North Carolina to deliver an address to a captive audience of American soldiers.

Recent polls have shown that three out of four Americans support the complete withdrawal of all American forces from Iraq. At the same time, they indicate that two-thirds of the population believes the war was not worth fighting, given its terrible costs.

Nearly 4,500 American soldiers and Marines were killed in the nearly nine years of war, while tens of thousands returned home severely wounded and many more suffered psychological and emotional trauma that will last a lifetime.

According to conservative estimates, the war's costs will amount to over \$3.5 trillion, a vast expenditure that is being paid for through unending cutbacks in public sector jobs and social programs upon which millions depend.

For the people of Iraq, the costs were far steeper, with an estimated one million lives lost and many millions more wounded or driven from their homes and turned into refugees. The war will forever be associated with horrific crimes such as the "shock and awe" bombing of Baghdad, the siege of Fallujah and the mass torture of detainees at Abu Ghraib, deeds that horrified and repulsed people all over the world, including in the US itself.

In packaging the Iraqi troop withdrawal that is supposed to be completed by the end of this month as an end to war and fulfillment of his campaign promises, Obama is merely recycling the illusions he peddled in 2008. Then he pledged that his administration would represent a clean break with the criminal policies of the Bush administration. Nearly four years later, the US military is at war in more countries than under Bush, Guantanamo and its military trials, along with torture, continue, and the police-state measures imposed in the wake of September 11, 2001 have been substantially expanded.

As for the withdrawal from Iraq, it was not Obama's intention, but rather the result of the failure to negotiate a deal with the Maliki government to allow up to 20,000 US troops to remain in the country. The sticking point was Washington's demand for blanket immunity for American forces from Iraqi prosecution. After all of the killing and brutality of the last nine years, such a guarantee was vehemently opposed by the Iraqi people.

It would be more appropriate to describe the current withdrawal as a repositioning of US forces for a continuation and expansion of war throughout the region.

In Iraq itself, uniformed troops are being replaced by a new army in civilian clothes. A massive, fortress-like American embassy in Baghdad has been erected in a walled compound of 104 acres—larger than the Vatican—with two similar facilities having been opened as consulates in the southern oil center of Basra and the Kurdish capital of Arbil in the north.

Operating out of these American fortresses will be up to 17,000 personnel. They will include 5,500 armed military contractors. The CIA will maintain its largest station anywhere in the world, and, according to reports, commandos of the Pentagon's Joint Special Operations Command will covertly continue their

presence, out of uniform. The plans led Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry (Democrat of Massachusetts), a close Obama ally, to question whether the US was “replacing a military presence with a private mercenary presence.”

As troops are pulled out of Iraq, deployments are being beefed up in the surrounding region, above all just across the border in Kuwait, where some 25,000 US military personnel are currently stationed and negotiations are underway to augment their numbers.

Tens of thousands more soldiers, sailors and Marines are deployed in the Persian Gulf and the other monarchical Gulf states—Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Saudi Arabia—which comprise the bastion of Middle East reaction known as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Washington is attempting to turn the GCC into an extension of NATO as the US and its Western allies steadily escalate military threats against Iran.

Asked by NBC News Monday whether US military forces in the region were prepared to intervene in Iraq if US interests were threatened, Centcom Commander Lt. Gen. Robert Caslen responded, “I know they would.”

The ongoing global eruption of American militarism has found fitting expression in a tour being conducted by Defense Secretary Leon Panetta in which unannounced stops are being added on virtually a daily basis.

Panetta was in Kabul, Afghanistan Tuesday, where the US military is preparing another “surge” in violence and negotiations are underway toward securing permanent US military bases and the continuing presence of tens of thousands of American troops long after the 2014 deadline announced by the Obama administration for the completion of an American withdrawal.

Before reaching Kabul, Panetta touched down in Djibouti, the tiny nation on the Horn of Africa, where the US now has more than 3,500 military personnel deployed, carrying out drone strikes and Special Forces operations against Somalia, Yemen and other countries in the region. There, Panetta suggested that the focus of the “global war on terrorism” had shifted to the African continent.

In the course of the trip, Panetta also announced that he would visit Libya, where the US and NATO carried

out a six-month war of “regime-change” to install a more pliant puppet state in Tripoli and secure control over the largest oil reserves on the African continent.

The turn toward Africa is bound up with a broader attempt by US imperialism to counter the influence of China. This finds its epicenter in the demonstrative US “return” to Asia, in which military might is being used in an attempt to offset China’s supplanting of American capitalism as the chief economic power and trading partner in the region.

The US withdrawal from Iraq does not represent a turn away from militarism. Rather, it is part of the tactical preparations for far more devastating wars to come. The explosive development of US militarism, which gave rise to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, is driven by the decline of American capitalism and the crisis of the world capitalist system, which have deepened immensely over the past decade.

For the third time in a century, the threat of world war is emerging ever more palpably from the deepest economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The struggle against this threat can be waged only by means of the independent political mobilization and international unity of the working class against the capitalist profit system, which is the source of militarism and war.

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