

Green zone green light

Al Ahram Weekly
6-12 December 2007

US-supported Iraqi leaders are drafting a long-term US-Iraq pact that many see as opening the door to permanent occupation, writes **Salah Hemeid**

On 26 November, US President George W Bush and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki signed a "declaration of principles" that will set the agenda for the future relationship between the US and Iraq. The cooperation pact indicates that Washington will maintain a "long-term" presence in Iraq, pledging to protect the government in Baghdad from internal coups and foreign enemies.

Public disclosure of the proposed arrangement came at a time when Washington has been trying to showcase recent "improvements" in security in Iraq following the deployment of an additional 30,000 US troops at the beginning of 2007 and the launching of a new "counterinsurgency" strategy. Under this two-tier approach, the American army used force and enlisted tribal sheikhs and war-weary citizens, mostly in Sunni areas, to combat extremist insurgents, especially Al-Qaeda and Shia Al-Mahdi Army militants.

Few details have been unveiled and the full pact, including the size of the US occupying force, remains to be worked out by 31 July 2008.

According to the "declaration" released by the White House, the military, economic and diplomatic agreement would be to "support the Iraqi government in contributing to the international fight against terrorism by confronting terrorists such as Al-Qaeda, its affiliates, other terrorist groups, as well as all other outlaw groups, such as criminal remnants of the former regime; and to provide security assurances to the Iraqi government to deter any external aggression and to ensure the integrity of Iraq's territory."

In return, Iraq committed itself to establish "a long-term enduring relationship" with America and pledged itself to "encouraging the flow of foreign investments to Iraq", which is widely believed to be a reference to American business in rebuilding the war-devastated nation, and especially it's badly damaged and vast oil industry.

With no timetable for the withdrawal of US troops made in the bilateral declaration, the agreement was immediately seen as a move to perpetuate the nearly five-year-old US occupation of Iraq, especially given that the US military has already built scores of bases all around the country.

Reliable Iraqi sources say that US military bases already constructed, or under construction, are large enough to accommodate some 100,000 American soldiers if the US command decides to keep them in Iraq. Sources say that the bases, mostly expansions of bases of the former Iraqi army, are buffered by broad swathes of land, fortified with heavy weaponry and remote-controlled electronic devices. The primary function of these bases will be to suppress internal opposition to the Iraqi government, but US air strength and special forces in these bases will also have rapid deployment capabilities for reaching points outside Iraq at need.

A report in *The Washington Post* on 22 May 2005 disclosed that four of these major bases were being constructed around existing airfields to ensure supply lines and troop mobility. It named the four as Tallil in the south, Al-Asad in the western desert region, Balad north of Baghdad, and Irbil in the northern Kurdish region. Al-Asad, for example, which can accommodate some 17,000 troops and workers, is described as a bustling American town, replete with a Burger King, Pizza Hut, a car dealership, stop signs, traffic regulations and young bikers clogging the roads.

The White House has denied that the US aims to perpetuate its military presence in Iraq. "We do not seek permanent bases in Iraq," spokeswoman Dana Perino said after the announcement of the bilateral agreement. But General Douglas Lute, assistant to President Bush for Iraq and Afghanistan, said the issue would be part of negotiations to decide the future of US-Iraq relations. "That's another dimension of continuing US support to the government of Iraq, and will certainly be a key item for negotiation next year," he told reporters in a recent press briefing.

Iraqi officials, however, told *Al-Ahram Weekly* that an understanding between the Iraqi government and the US administration and American officials has already been reached about a long term US presence in Iraq that might include the presence of some 50-70,000 soldiers across Iraq for years to come. "There is a sort of consensus (within the Shia-Kurdish controlled government) that a form of American long term presence is in Iraq's interests," one official said on condition of anonymity.

It is unclear, however, how key Iraqi political groups will react to such a long-term presence once an agreement is reached. Iraq's present constitution states that international treaties and agreements must be ratified by a two-thirds majority in parliament.

So far, the main Sunni groups -- notably, the Iraqi Accord Front -- and the Shia Al-Sadr movement have declared their objection to the Maliki-Bush understanding. Both can muster enough support among other members of parliament to torpedo the ratification of any final US-Iraq agreement. They can also use the issue to mobilise disgruntled public opinion against the government and the US occupation.

US-supported Kurdish forces will likely welcome any such agreement, as will Maliki's Al-Dawa Party. It remains to be seen, however, if the main pro-Iranian Shia group, the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), will endorse an extended American presence. SCIRI's leader, Abdel Aziz Al-Hakim, was received in Washington last month to discuss the plan with President Bush.

Moreover, the Bush administration, or its successor, has to convince US Congress to ratify any such an agreement. The 2008 Defense Appropriations Act -- which Bush signed into law in mid-November -- bars the administration from setting up permanent bases in Iraq, or from controlling Iraqi oil. The 2008 Defense Authorization Act, which has passed the House and Senate and is expected to arrive to the president in the next few weeks, contains similar restrictions.

Yet Congress, especially in light of hysteria about Iran, can likely be convinced that long-term US military presence would serve US strategic interests in the Gulf region. It may also be argued by the US administration that the "agreement" is not -- and perhaps would not hold the force of -- a treaty, and therefore would not be subject to Congressional oversight. Much

resides in the language adopted. The agreement could avoid any reference to troops or bases and paint the "new relationship" as one of cooperation between fully "sovereign" and independent states with common interests.

Such cooperation agreements have been signed before. In 1991, the US military was expelled from the Philippines, but by building bases for the country extended its stay indefinitely. US-operated bases in Saudi Arabia and in the Gulf States function under a similar pretence of national government control.

Given deep suspicions among many Arabs about American goals in Iraq, US military bases will certainly be seen as an attempt to make permanent the occupation. A ring of US military bases throughout the region makes sense if US strategy is to protect Israel and command the region's energy resources as the best way to contain America's chief economic rivals, the European Union and China.