

Is the U.S. Really Leaving Iraq?

Despite planned troop withdrawal, our presence there will be huge

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“After nearly nine years, America’s war in Iraq will be over.”

With his Oct. 21 statement on our withdrawal of troops from Iraq by year-end, President Barack Obama is keeping his promise to the American people for complete withdrawal of U.S. troops and satisfying the Status of Forces Agreement with the Iraqi government. Mr. Obama declared that the U.S. and Iraq would have a “relationship between sovereign states, an equal partnership based on mutual interests and mutual respect.”

Yet even with the withdrawal under way, Mr. Obama’s actions continue to undermine the sovereignty of Iraq.

Even without the presence of U.S. troops, America’s footprint in Iraq is immense. In addition to the fortress near the site of Saddam Hussein’s palace, two additional, \$100 million buildings are slated to be built outside Baghdad as mini-embassies in the north and south of Iraq. Iraqis know that U.S. troops acting as trainers will still be in Iraq, both as a permanent presence of less than 200 and as an undetermined presence of U.S. troops permanently stationed in neighboring countries. In addition to these troops and embassy personnel, a large and robust force of CIA agents are presumed to be on the ground. As one of the largest contingencies of foreign personnel in any sovereign nation, it is no surprise that Iraqis refused to bargain away their right to enforce their own laws by giving our troops immunity from prosecution.

The use of a huge personnel force, with a large number of private contractors, has even stoked the ire of some Republicans. Rep. Darrell Issa, chairman of the House Oversight Committee, in a recent letter to President Obama expressed his dismay at the drastic increase of contractors as a private army in Iraq. “The American people have a right to know the past, present and future status of private security contractors in these regions,” Mr. Issa wrote. Taken a step further, the American people have a right to know that our stated withdrawal is far from a true withdrawal of our presence from Iraq.

The danger of this continued involvement in the country we invaded on false pretenses almost nine years ago cannot be ignored. With aspirations for freedom and democracy spreading throughout the region, a perceived U.S. client-state will act as a thorn in the region’s side. How can Iraqis believe in their system of government while they watch the continued construction of permanent U.S. facilities in Iraq?

Many nationalist Iraqi groups — including those in the insurgency as well as underground organizations — oppose America’s large presence, and some have promised increased

violence. Muqtada al-Sadr's party, with 40 seats in parliament and an underground army, has threatened a variety of measures, demonstrating its opposition to the extended presence of the U.S. footprint. These militants do not care whether the Americans in their country are troops or contractors. The continuing influence of Mr. al-Sadr's group should not be underestimated; in late September, a huge demonstration of his followers marched against the extension of U.S. troops in Iraq.

Our current policy in the region, as it convulses with the fever of freedom and democracy, is to treat each country as a specific case rather than prescribe a one-size-fits-all reaction to these revolutions. That is the most realistic and measured response. But as the Arab spring turns to fall, the Obama administration's claims of support for these movements and its call for "other nations [to] respect Iraq's sovereignty" must show in our actions. We won't be believed if pronouncements of a free and sovereign Iraq are made from the top floors of our office complex in Baghdad.

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