

US-Iraq “Agreement”: A Pact With the Devil

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The big bang is not that Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki’s majority Shi’ite/Kurdish 37-member cabinet in Baghdad has approved the draft of a security pact with the George W Bush (and Barack Obama) administrations allowing the [US military](#) to stay in Iraq for three more years; it’s that the 30-strong Sadrist bloc will move heaven and Earth – including massive nationwide protests – to bloc the pact in the Iraqi National Assembly.

The proposed Status of Forces Agreement not only sets a date for American troop withdrawal – 2011 – but also puts new restrictions on US combat operations in Iraq starting on January 1 and requires a military pullback from urban areas by June 30. The pact goes before parliament in a week or so.

Sadrist spokesman Ahmed al-Masoudi stressed this Sunday that the pact “did not mean anything” and “hands Iraq over on a golden platter and for an indefinite period”.

Masoudi is right on the money when he says the overwhelming majority of popular opinion is against it and the Sadrists and many Sunni parties insist a popular referendum to approve it is essential.

Shi’ite leader Muqtada al-Sadr’s position is and has always been “end the occupation now”. That happens to be the same view from [Tehran](#): the pact further extends Iraq’s agony as an American colony. But Iranian state TV has been spinning it as a victory for the Maliki government – stressing the US was forced to make concessions (in fact Maliki did not extract all the concessions he wanted in terms of prosecuting US troops for crimes in Iraq).

Last week, a spokesman for the Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani in Iraq said he would “directly intervene” if he felt the pact was against Iraqi sovereignty. In this case, he’d better start intervening this week – when a debate about the pact starts ahead of a vote on November 24. Parliament can vote for or against it, but cannot make any changes to the text.

As for how much of the 275-member parliament in Baghdad is against the pact depends on how much they are in the US pocket – like Maliki’s Interior and Defense ministries. As much as US General Ray Odierno, the top commander in Iraq, has charged that [Iran](#) has been bribing parliamentarians to reject the pact, the reverse also applies.

Muqtada, make your move

This version of the pact was basically supported by Maliki’s Defense, Interior, Foreign Affairs and Finance ministries, by the Kurdistan Alliance and by the Sunni Iraqi Accord Front, led by former US intelligence asset and former interim prime minister, Iyad Allawi. So the backbone of support is Kurdish and “establishment” Shi’ite. That does not account for the crucial

leader of the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC), Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, very close to Iran, who recently has been less critical of the pact. The SIIC in the end caved in.

In theory, all US troops should be out of Iraq on January 1, 2012. For all practical purposes, this is the new timeline for the end of the occupation – way longer than Obama's 16 months.

Even though the pact allows Iraq limited authority to try US soldiers and the [Bush administration](#)-enabled army of defense contractors (only in the case of serious crimes committed off-duty and off-base), and formally forbids the Pentagon to use Iraq as a base to attack Syria or Iran, the pact does make a mockery of Iraq's "sovereignty". For the first time, occupying US troops will have a clear mandate straight from Iraq's elected leadership, instead of a United Nations Security Council resolution enacted after Bush invaded Iraq in 2003.

The US has to end all patrols of Iraqi streets by June 2009 – five months into the Obama presidency – and has to fully withdraw by the end of 2011, unless the Iraqi government miraculously asks the US to stay.

From an anti-imperial point of view, the only good thing about the pact is that it does not allow the establishment of permanent US military bases in Iraq – a point that has been stressed ad infinitum by Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari. Inter Press Service correspondent Gareth Porter, among others, has stressed this is the final nail in the coffin of the neo-conservative, neo-imperial dream of having Iraq at the Middle East center of an empire of bases. In a quirky historical twist, Maliki knocks out US Vice President Dick Cheney.

The Sadrists anyway are not convinced. Last month, Muqtada said, "If they tell you that the agreement ends the presence of the occupation, let me tell you that the occupier will retain its bases. And whoever tells you that it gives us sovereignty is a liar."

So what will the Sadrists do in practice? Before the approval Muqtada, in a statement read out by his spokesman Salah al-Ubaidi at the Kufa mosque, said, "If the American forces remain, I will reinforce the resisters, especially the brigades subsumed under the banner of the Judgment Day," Muqtada rallied all these "Bands of the Eternal Truth" to "enlist behind this mujahid banner". This Sadrist version of special forces would only attack American forces, and not the Iraqi military (controlled by the Maliki government).

Muqtada is in a difficult position. He has to confront the problem that strategically Tehran subscribes to not attacking US troops as the best way for the Americans to eventually leave. And Muqtada at the moment is studying in Qom, the spiritual capital of Iran – he could hardly afford to antagonize his hosts. To top it all, the Sadrist movement had been adopting a Hezbollah approach and reconverting from militia activities to being firmly embedded in the Iraqi political landscape. Maliki has made his move. Now it's time for Muqtada's.

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