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Asia Times Online

I want to occupy you forever

By Pepe Escobar
4/13/2011

Heeeeeee's back! Every time Iraqi nationalist Shi'ite cleric/politician Muqtada al-Sadr resurfaces with a bang, the [United States](#) establishment shakes like a willow tree, while US corporate media duly dusts off the usual "radical, anti-American, Iran-friendly firebrand cleric" rhetoric.

Saddam Hussein's [regime](#) in Iraq was finished eight years ago this past Saturday; Shi'ite Sadrists and most Sunnis regard April 9 as the ignominious day Iraq was annexed by [Washington](#). Iraq is that Arab nation that was under a no-fly zone for a decade - and then had almost all of its society and infrastructure smashed by the Pentagon (neo-conservative [Washington](#) dreamed of rebuilding it, for a profit).

So this is what the Sadrists sent as a gift card to the "liberators"; you'd better leave our land by the end of 2011, for good, as agreed. Or else one of the Pentagon's ultimate nightmares will be back; a revived, revamped Mahdi Army unleashing guerrilla tactics.

Muqtada's gift card message - he continues to study theology in the Iranian holy city of Qom - was delivered via his spokesman Salah al-Obaidi and backed up by a million-man-march across Baghdad. The masses came from all over Iraq's south and from Diyala province to the east (the crowds were smaller because security closed off streets and bridges leading to the rally, near a US military base.)

The message came like clockwork, just one day after Pentagon head Robert Gates visited northern Iraq to convince the Nuri al-Maliki [government](#) to, well, keep occupying the country to an indefinite future. By then, the US State Department had already announced it wanted to keep

an army of mercenaries and what could amount to thousands of bureaucrats in the largest US Embassy in the world. The mercenaries allegedly will protect the bureaucrats. Talk about American exceptionalism.

According to Muqtada, "The first thing we will do is escalate the military resistance activity and reactivate the Mahdi Army in a new statement which will be published later ... Second is to escalate the peaceful and public resistance through sit-ins." So if the US stays, Muqtada will turn Baghdad into a giant Tahrir Square - with the added bonus of commandos turning the Green Zone red and condemning contractors to road-kill status. The great 2011 Arab revolt keeps reinventing itself in myriad ways.

Freebase, anyone?

Anyone who seriously bet years ago that Washington would pull no punches to edit the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) it signed with Iraq must have reached Wall Street investment banker status by now.

The SOFA was signed by former president George W Bush in November 2008. According to the text, the whole of the US military, plus their civilian personnel, must exit Iraq by December 31, 2011, at midnight. If Washington does not honor the agreement, the US will be technically at war with Iraq - as in US soldiers illegally deployed without the consent of the US Congress.

There's absolutely no evidence this SOFA will be amended before the deadline, although Maliki's government, under extreme pressure, could always ask the Barack Obama administration to extend the occupation. But for this, Maliki needs the Sadrists - which are part of the government.

So Muqtada's message is actually a stern warning to Maliki. And by the way, this is not only about 47,000 US boots off the ground; it's about the end of the Iraq chapter of the US empire of military bases (other rallies went on Saturday near US bases in Kirkuk, Dhi Qar, and al-Asad base in Anbar province).

No wonder both the Obama administration and the Pentagon are on red alert. Vice President Joe Biden urgently called Maliki after Gates left Iraq to keep up the pressure. Iraqi parliamentarians, for their part, stress any extension would have to be approved by parliament. And Muhammad Salman, from the Sunni Iraqiya party (most Sunnis are Iraqi nationalists who also want the US out) has already talked about a popular referendum.

The SOFA itself was supposed to be approved by referendum (it never happened). In a nutshell, the only players who want the US to stay are the military in Iraqi Kurdistan - who fear they may be overpowered by Iraqi Arabs.

Essentially, Washington is bewildered in its reaction to the House of Saud's power-play in Bahrain - a ruthless counter-revolution imposing its intolerant/repressive/militaristic brand of Sunni Islam over Shi'ites all across the Gulf. The anger felt by Gulf Shi'ites is shared by Iraqi Shi'ites; but from that to assume that Iran will increase its influence with them is not a given. The

Maliki government is close to Iran - but that does not imply that without US boots on the ground Baghdad will become a Tehran protectorate.

Shi'ite Iraqis also routinely accuse wealthy Wahhabis from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) of having funded hardcore Sunni guerrillas during the civil war in Iraq between 2005 and 2007 (a claim I confirmed at the time in Baghdad).

Most of all, Washington worries about the future of the US 5th Fleet in Bahrain. Judging by the Saudi power-play, it does not seem the base is going anywhere else; even if it did, bets can be made that [Qatar](#) or the UAE would be more than happy to welcome it.

The bottom line is that the majority of Iraqis, Sunnis and Shi'ites want the US to pack up and go on December 31. In the unlikely event Baghdad would want air security (against whom? The House of Saud?), the US could come up with an arrangement out of the al-Udeid base in Qatar. The Maliki government is not suicidal; forget about a SOFA extension. As of December 31, 2011, the tragic Iraqi chapter of the US worldwide empire of bases may be finally over.