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US Occupation of Iraq Continues Unabated

by: Dahr Jamail

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On July 4 in Baghdad, Vice President Joe Biden, who campaigned with Barack Obama on a platform of ending the occupation of Iraq, found himself in one of former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's lavish buildings, the Al-Faw Palace. While one of Saddam Hussein's thrones sat on the side of the room, Biden presided over a swearing-in ceremony for 237 soldiers, who were becoming US citizens. Speaking of the ceremony, Biden said, "We did it in Saddam's palace, and I can think of nothing better. That S.O.B. is rolling over in his grave right now." Perhaps the irony of both the scene and his statement were lost to Biden. For if Saddam Hussein was rolling in his grave, the reason would have less to do with one of his palaces being used as a naturalization center for US soldiers, and more to do with the fact that the US government has no intention of withdrawing from Iraq anytime soon.

We have passed the June 30 deadline that, according to a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) signed between US Ambassador Ryan Crocker and Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari on November 17, 2008, was the date all US forces were to have been withdrawn from all of Iraq's cities. Today, however, there are at least 134,000 US soldiers in Iraq - a number barely lower than the number that were there in 2003. In addition, US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates testified on June 9 that the United States would maintain an average of at least 100,000 troops in Iraq through fiscal year 2010.

The SOFA is a sieve, and the number of US military personnel in Iraq is remaining largely intact for now. Add to the 134,000 US soldiers almost the exact number of military contractors (132,610 and increasing), 36,061 of which, according to a recent Department of Defense report, are US citizens.

While the military and most corporate media would like you to believe that from now on no US soldiers will step foot in Iraqi cities, US military patrols in them are ongoing and will continue.

In addition, there has been an assumption that all US military bases within Iraqi city limits would be moved. For example, US Army Forward Operating Base Falcon, home to 3,000 US troops, is clearly within the city limits of Baghdad. But US military officials, working with Iraqis in the US-supported Iraqi government, have other ideas. "We and the Iraqis decided it wasn't in the city," a military official told the Christian Science Monitor. Thus, city lines are redrawn, to the convenience of the US military, to render certain bases and forward operating bases "outside" of Iraqi cities.

While military commanders claim to have handed over 142 military outposts around Iraq to the Iraqis, US troops will continue to occupy 320 other outposts around Iraq.

Meanwhile, the Democratically controlled Congress just passed a war-spending bill that allocated over \$100 billion more for the ongoing occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, and the military (and military contractors) in Iraq is busily expanding and augmenting new bases in rural areas of Iraq. In fact, they are even building new bases in Iraq.

Furthermore, at least 50,000 troops will remain in Iraq until at least the end of 2011, despite the fact that, according to the SOFA, all US "combat" forces will leave Iraq by December 31, 2011.

A July 30 referendum vote on the SOFA is scheduled to take place in Iraq. Despite attempts by the Obama administration to postpone the referendum, it appears as though the vote will take place. Considering the fact that according to recent polls, 73 percent of Iraqis oppose the presence of US forces, the referendum, if legitimate, will put the Obama administrations long-term plans for Iraq in jeopardy as the vote could force US forces out of Iraq as they would no longer be under the legal "protection" of the SOFA.

Although we can only speculate as to whether the referendum will actually reflect the will of the Iraqi people, there will be one of two outcomes:

1. Due to Kurdish and Sunni opposition to the withdrawal of US forces, Maliki postpones the referendum. The US, which is also interested in maintaining the SOFA, supports Maliki in the delay they (Obama administration) have previously pushed for.

2. The Maliki regime overcomes this opposition and does not interfere with the carrying out of the vote or the results of the referendum, which will most likely reflect the will of the Iraqi people to have US forces withdraw from Iraq completely. This would mean the Maliki regime does not want US forces to remain in Iraq, feels strong enough to finally stand on its own and is prepared to settle scores with the formerly US-backed Sahwa forces (Sunni militia), to establish absolute control in Baghdad.

Regardless of the outcome, it is clear that Iraq is further down the road of Balkanization, a plan that Biden has supported for years -to have Iraq split into three rump states. There is already evidence for this - for as Iraqi refugees in Syria and Jordan have been forced to return home due to funding to support them having been cut due to the Maliki regime pressuring hosting countries, as well as the UN, to have them return. Those returning have been unable to return to their homes. Instead, they are being forced to relocate to either Sunni or Shia areas. Moreover, the Iraqi government has been making no effort to help them return to their original homes, which indicates the Maliki regime is interested in supporting the Balkanization of Iraq.

Nevertheless, again we find the US policy of long-term, indefinite occupation of Iraq to be at loggerheads with the will of the vast majority of the Iraqi people.

From June 28 to July 5, at least 82 Iraqis were killed and 225 wounded, which amounts to another typical week of US occupation of their country. Let us watch how the Obama administration reacts to the referendum at the end of this month, since President Obama is clearly not interested in withdrawing from Iraq anymore than he is interested in a withdrawal from Afghanistan.