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## Obama's Pledge: A Responsible End to War in Iraq?

by Bob Tollast

*As a candidate for president, I pledged to bring the war in Iraq to a responsible end.*

*-Barack Obama, 8/2/2010*

At the beginning of May, the Commission on Wartime Contracting in Iraq and Afghanistan presented CWC report 4 to Congress, detailing the forthcoming State Department mission in Iraq.<sup>1</sup> It lays bare the challenges in what will be an historic mission, in uncharted waters. It also raises serious questions about Obama's pledge to bring the war to a responsible end, and whether this will be fully resourced.

With Operation New Dawn coming to an end, two security firms, Triple Canopy and Global Strategies Group are already approved to provide over 5,500 contractors to support the biggest State Department Mission in history, joining 6 other firms- a current total of 10 billion dollars' worth of security contracts.<sup>2</sup> The CWC report however, highlights the tight budgetary restrictions the mission will have to operate under. Since then, the Jaish Al Mahdi has been all but re-activated, raising the unwelcome spectre of widespread, renewed Shia violence. This is against a backdrop of a horrific spike in American casualties, with Leon Pannetta only being the latest to indict Iranian involvement. The recent ISF offensive against Special Groups- and possibly JAM itself in the JAM stronghold of Maysan, has so far shown indeterminate results.

At stake now are America's military, economic and growing cultural exchanges with Iraq- in short, everything that has been achieved so far and the very future of Iraq itself. The viability of this civilian led mission depends perilously on assuming a continued status quo. Yet the past few months have seen a sharp increase in violence against Americans. If his recent announcement to the B.B.C Arabic service is anything to go by, Moqtada Al Sadr is explicitly claiming credit for these attacks.

Iraq certainly has a lot in the running that could yet make it a peaceful, prosperous place. Numerous oil funded reconstruction projects will be underway this year and the IMF recently forecast Iraq's oil fueled economic growth could rival the rate of China's expansion. But funding depends largely on fragile oil infrastructure, with major pipelines and refineries in the volatile Kirkuk region. Iraq's involvement in the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, an international scheme to combat oil and gas related corruption, has yet to show results.<sup>3</sup>

While the majority of oil projects are in Southern Iraq where security incidents are low overall, the situation is tenuous. The current attacks against U.S forces mean foreign civilian

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<sup>1</sup> CWC Special Report 4: [http://www.wartimecontracting.gov/docs/CWC\\_SpecialReport4.pdf](http://www.wartimecontracting.gov/docs/CWC_SpecialReport4.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Contracts secured as reported in Iraq Business News:

<http://www.iraq-businessnews.com/2011/05/06/two-security-firms-win-big-iraq-contracts/>

<sup>3</sup> Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative in Iraq: <http://eiti.org/Iraq>

interests in Iraq will have to hope this is not a sign of things to come. While many nations are opening consulates across Iraq, none have the interests at stake that America does. As the CWC report emphasizes

Given that Congress has appropriated more than \$1 trillion for U.S. operations in Afghanistan and Iraq since 2001, the prospect of jeopardizing the gains in Iraq and U.S. interests in the region to save a small fraction of that sum looks like false economy indeed.

### ***Shia Militants Prepare To Enter the Void***

In April, Al Sadr threatened to re-activate the Jaish Al Mahdi with another public outburst,

What if the U.S. forces and others stay in our beloved lands? What if their companies and embassy headquarters will continue to exist with the American flags hoisted on them? Will you be silent? Will you overlook this?<sup>4</sup>

More recently the notoriously mercurial cleric shifted position again as The Washington Post reported him saying, “the matter of the lifting of the freezing of the Mahdi Army is connected to the public and political agreement among Iraqis,”<sup>5</sup> Now he brazenly accepts attacks on USF-I.

Nouri Al Maliki made it clear that if there is consensus for a stay behind American force in Iraq, all parties, including Al Sadr’s would have to tow the line. The fact that Moqtada’s party is now a vital part of Maliki’s majority could make it harder to pressurize him to end their alliance, but this must happen soon.

We know Moqtada is keen to be in the seat of government, and the long stand down of the Jaish Al Mahdi is evidence of that. It would be odd to join a government while your forces lob mortar bombs at parliament, as inclusion of the Irish Sinn Fein in mainstream British politics shows. To date, even his proclamation that it is “forbidden” to work for a foreign company does not seem to have sparked a wave of assassinations in Southern Iraq where the multi nationals are operating in force. But his reference to “American companies and embassy headquarters” last month is directly at odds with the coming State Department Mission. The implications for DoS are sinister.

Mazin al-Nazeni, the Sadrists representative for Basra has already stated he will not tolerate diplomats and their consulates.<sup>6</sup> With another summer of electricity outages and outrage upon us, Basra oil workers have threatened strikes. This potentially jeopardizes production at the vast Rumaila field. Iraq has been awash with demonstrations inspired by The Arab Spring, and the Sadr Movement is quick to cynically exploit this- particularly if Al Sadr falls out with Maliki.

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4 Al Sadr threatens embassies as reported by Bushra Juhi in Yahoo! News: [http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20110409/ap\\_on\\_re\\_mi\\_ea/ml\\_iraq](http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20110409/ap_on_re_mi_ea/ml_iraq)

5 Al Sadr backtracks over threats as reported in The Washington Post: [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/war-zones/in-iraq-an-internal-shiite-battle-may-be-key-to-us-troop-extension/2011/05/13/AFQ4wm2G\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/war-zones/in-iraq-an-internal-shiite-battle-may-be-key-to-us-troop-extension/2011/05/13/AFQ4wm2G_story.html)

6 Basra Sadrist slams diplomacy, reported in Stars and Stripes: <http://www.stripes.com/news/middle-east/after-u-s-pullback-iraq-envoys-are-more-vulnerable-1.141310>

However, this year we were again reminded of Al Sadr's Achilles heel : running away from confrontation. At the beginning of this year he returned to Iraq in apparent triumph only to flee back to Iran after death threats from the Iranian backed Asaib Ahl al-Haq (League of The Righteous.)<sup>7</sup>

### ***Sunnis on the Brink of Violence***

Poor governance is a primary driver of insurgent violence and could yet be AQI's best friend. Colonel Gary Anderson's recent SWJ essay, *Civilians In The Build Phase* gave another disturbing reminder of how Nouri Al Maliki has clumsily intervened in coalition security gains by making politically motivated appointments in the security services. Similar allegations surfaced in leaked cables that Maliki meddled with appointments at the Iraqi National Intelligence Service. Anderson quotes an Iraqi farmer who fears Iraq is heading to another dictatorship, a fear widespread among Sunnis, who often remark they believe Maliki's government to be Iranian puppets.

Iraq observers have already read numerous reports of Sahwa fighters changing sides again. Through the fog of war this is hard to verify, but Maliki's Government has certainly made enough enemies among some of the Awakening tribes, following mass arrests of many members. The Government cites its "no militias" declaration, but allegations of sectarianism remain and the integration of Sahwa fighters into security forces remains slower than hoped. Reuters recently quoted Muhanad Majeed, a young Sahwa member from Samarra, stating, "I swear to God, al Qaeda will return if Sahwa fighters are not integrated into the security forces in Samarra. No one knows al Qaeda people here and no one can stop them but us."<sup>8</sup>

Following John F. Drakes weekly security updates on Iraq Business News and violent incidents on Aswat Al Iraq, it is clear that the insurgency in Iraq has adapted to assassination centric tactics, widespread use of silencers and UVIED's (magnetic bombs), as well as the improved IRAMS seen recently. Occasionally, this has claimed the lives of Brigadiers, Colonels and in some cases even a General. Professors have been targeted, as well as other figures crucial for the formation of healthy civic society.

It's a sign of how beaten up Al Qaeda are that they still struggle to carry out the huge VBIED attacks of days gone by. But in the more volatile areas they are still capable of sowing chaos. AQI is enjoying a limited resurgence and only time will tell if continued bad governance on Maliki's part- or corruption on the local level as Col. Anderson also cited, turns a brief resurgence of violence into a sustained one. That scenario is not unimaginable for reasons outlined above, and if it comes into being, the job of The State Department in Iraq will likely be hugely expensive and probably ineffective, as the CWC report notes

Attempts at assassination and intimidation continue. Ethnic and other rivalries dragged out formation of a new Iraqi government nearly nine months after the March 2010 elections. Late 2010 also saw bomb attacks on Iraqi Christians and Shia Arab neighborhoods. Meanwhile, Iraqi Arabs, minority Kurds, and Turkmen populations

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<sup>7</sup> Al Sadr flees Iraq reported in Asharq Al Awsat:  
<http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=23926>

<sup>8</sup> Disappointed Sahwa members as reported by Reuters.  
<http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/03/11/us-iraq-militia-idUSTRE72A1Q620110311>

continue to dispute boundaries, control of Kirkuk, and division of natural-gas and oil resources.

### ***The Same Danger Zones, Now With Added Contractors...***

It's now estimated that as many as 17,000 U.S personnel will stay on in Iraq post 2012. Currently, it appears likely that the security component of this force will act without DoD support, give or take a handful of Marines at the Baghdad Embassy and the small OSC-I component.

While Iraqi politicians will soon debate and vote on the possibility of a stay behind force of American military, Peter Mansoor recently stated his belief that Iraqis will be unable to decide on this within the required time frame. At the current time then, America's future in Iraq looks distinctly contractor based.

The majority will only support the core DoS roles, but a significant outlay will be allotted to private security contractors carrying out static and convoy defense. In short, this defense will involve security for the following missions:

- Security for Police Development Programme Sites by air and land (28 sites in total.)
- Security for the Dedicated 5 OSC-I sites continuing advisory work of Operation New Dawn.
- Security for the four Consulates which will continue the work of key PRT's as well as furthering trade development.
- Provide security for the four Embassy Branch Offices conducting vital reconciliation work in potential "flash-points."

If the ISF fail to contain an active Jaish al Mahdi, any outreach to these projects on the ground could become potentially unviable. The two SIGIR reports from Jan/ April this year are equally frank about the dangers ahead, stating that "OSC-I's DoD components will operate in a potentially dangerous security environment that may limit U.S. Embassy-Baghdad's day-to-day oversight."

A possible scenario might involve a resurgence of EFP's in southern Iraq smuggled in by the Quds/ League of Righteous alliance. The vital trade, political liaison and reconciliation mission of the four consulates/ Embassy Branch Offices, so crucial to Iraq's future could be restricted to working over email or a last minute visit by helicopter. As January's SIGIR report says, the situation in Baghdad is such that "according to the DoS OIG, the dangers of operating in Baghdad make setting up meetings with Iraqi officials complicated, and reaching out to ordinary Iraqi citizens all but impossible."

Regarding PRT's and the astonishing work they have achieved for development and security, they now "move outside their compounds only under heavy security."

Tragically, this was not enough to protect USAID member Steven Everhart who was killed by an IED on June 24th following a visit to Baghdad University's Business College. In the absence of such good work, situational awareness on the ground may only worsen. Will we see a return to pre-Surge conditions where development projects are put on hold or abandoned completely? The SIGIR reports highlight reconstruction projects planned by the Anbar Investment Commission that will see the most positive developments come to Ramadi for the first time in years- maybe decades. Yet they are a fraction of what is at stake.

Considering the dangers ahead, one is forced to ask: How does swapping troops for armed contractors represent an “end” to the war? Dos Bureau of Diplomatic Security notes there will be “Quick Reaction Elements” in their security plans. Questions in the SIGIR reports remain however,

Already, uncertainty and disagreement regarding what constitutes “inherently governmental activities”—those which should not be contracted out—is becoming more pronounced with regard to PSCs. In question are activities such as counter-battery fire, hostage rescue, and improvised explosive device (IED) clearance.

Counter-battery fire and IED clearance? DoS and DoD will have to continue working closely with Nouri Al Maliki to ensure that the coming State mission does not degenerate into the scenario mentioned above. If it goes that far, it will make a mockery of Obama’s pledge to “end the war.”

### ***So What Should We Propose?***

Nobody proposes the United States rip up the SOFA and Strategic Framework Agreement and force the Iraqi politicians to accept a couple of divisions on Iraq for the indefinite future. If anything, those who do propose such a thing are Iraqis like Sheik Qasim of Anbar. Also, the presence of American forces represents “oxygen” for certain terror groups and grievances, justified or not. In that respect, withdrawal might allay some fears and suspicions within Iraq.

As Deputy CPA Governor of Anbar Keith Mines remarked when I interviewed him for SWJ,

It was interesting, and you can track this pretty clearly, that whenever there was an announcement from the Coalition that indicated the foreigners would be moving out of governing and turning things over to Iraqis, the violence went down.

Yet many will not end their fight until all foreigners or rival power/ ethnic groups are vanquished- the zero sum game. Keeping too much American assistance can lead to fatal dependency- as we saw in Vietnam. Too little, and there is a risk of under-resourcing a critical mission. Given the recent admission by Al Sadr of renewed attacks on Americans, Obama must quickly re-define the relationship between the U.S.A, the E.U and Iraq based on consultation with allied countries.

Obama must advise Nouri Al Maliki to end his alliance of convenience with Moqtada Al Sadr immediately unless JAM cease hostilities. The U.S and the E.U must let Maliki understand that failure to pressurize the Sadrists could result in cuts civil and military aid, even if that is a last resort. Recently, the Interior Ministry signed a deal with a large American company for agricultural equipment. Maliki must know that if he persists in tolerating Al Sadr, such deals are not guaranteed.

If the Sadrists continue hostilities towards foreigners and Iraqis, the U.S should consult Maliki on the possibility of a second Charge of the Knights style operation, since Al Sadr has a history of backing off in the face of a large, conventional attack. The current Maysan operation may not be enough. Furthermore, Al Sadr has broken off talks with the U.S. He thinks the cards are in his favor- tough action could force him back to negotiation- or exile. This would send a

strong positive message to Sunnis and a substantial number of Shias who are concerned about resurgent militias, further boosting government support.

It must be remembered that the Sadrists represent only a portion of Shia opinion, and while they have political influence, they are far from dominant. If The DoS mission is to be successful, allowing Maliki to continue his alliance with Al Sadr, based purely on power, cannot be permitted. If Al Sadr does not accept the chance of peaceful politics given to him by the sacrifice of coalition troops, then he should be cast into political purgatory. As for Maliki, he cannot oversee massive foreign investment- Iraq's great hope, whilst tolerating the very men determined to derail progress. Based on his past record, one thing we can hope from Maliki is that he will honor his word and turn up the heat on Al Sadr. Then the Iraqis could focus on dealing with the more fringe radical groups. If Maliki fails, there are some tough decisions ahead. And Iraq is no stranger to tough decisions. For now, significant challenges remain if we are to see a responsible end in Iraq.

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