

## **Gulan Media**

# **Aftermath: The U.S. Troop Withdrawal and Its Implications for the KRG**

**By Ted Galen Carpenter**

December 7, 2011

President Barack Obama's announcement in early November that the last U.S. troops would be leaving Iraq by the end of the year triggered a flurry of discussion in both Iraq and the United States. The president's political opponents immediately accused him of endangering the future of a democratic Iraq and of weakening Washington's strategic position in the Middle East.

But Obama's statement should not have come as a surprise to anyone. It merely confirmed the agreement that President George W. Bush negotiated during his final weeks in office with the government of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. True, the Obama administration had tried to get Baghdad to agree to extend the troop withdrawal deadline, but that effort never had much prospect of success. The reality is that with the notable exception of the Kurdish population, most Iraqis want the American soldiers out of their country.

Washington's decision to abide by the December 31 deadline is simply the latest recognition that it is not possible to make Iraq into a bastion of U.S. power and influence in the Middle East. During the initial years following the invasion and occupation, two schools of thought vied for dominance in the Bush administration. One was that a united Iraq would become a pro-Western, democratic model for the entire region. The other was skeptical that Iraq would remain viable over the long term and argued that Washington's best option was to forge a close relationship with the KRG and have a de facto independent Iraqi Kurdistan become a key U.S. political and military ally.

The latter strategy always made more sense than the notion of a stable, united, democratic Iraq, especially since the Kurdish people were the only portion of the population that was strongly pro-American and not averse to the stationing of U.S. troops. But one factor became an insurmountable barrier to either plan. The American people quickly grew weary of the Iraq mission and had no enthusiasm—or even tolerance—for the prospect of a long-term, large-scale U.S. military presence anywhere in that country. That attitude has grown stronger over time.

The impending departure of the remaining U.S. military personnel, though, places both the KRG and the people of Iraqi Kurdistan in a very delicate position. Iraq is a weak

country, both in terms of its internal cohesion and its ability to resist the power and influence of stronger neighbors. Both factors create problems for the KRG.

Kurdish leaders are likely to find it increasingly difficult to protect Kurdistan's hard-won political autonomy. The Maliki government shows troubling authoritarian tendencies and a determination to expand Baghdad's power at the expense of local and regional governments. As the most autonomous and successful region, Kurdistan is the primary target of the effort to strengthen the authority of the national government. Once the last U.S. troops leave, one can anticipate that the Maliki administration will press the KRG regarding control over oil revenues, the status of Kirkuk, and many other issues.

It would be an overstatement to suggest that Washington will have no ability to restrain Baghdad on such matters. After all, the huge U.S. embassy with its thousands of diplomatic employees and private security contractors indicates that the United States intends to exert continuing influence over the Iraqi government. But without a sizable troop presence, that influence is likely to be more limited than American officials believe.

In addition to the increased pressure that the KRG will face from Baghdad, tensions involving two hostile neighboring states, Iran and Turkey, will probably rise. The U.S. military commitment acted as a restraint on Ankara and to a lesser, but still significant, extent on Tehran. There is no doubt, for example, that U.S. pressure helped limit the scope of Turkey's military incursions into Iraqi Kurdistan in pursuit of insurgents from the PKK who sometimes used that territory as a safe haven. Absent Washington's opposition, Turkish military operations would assuredly have been broader and more sustained.

Now with the final departure of U.S. troops, that restraint on Ankara will be weaker. Tehran is also likely to engage in more violations of KRG territory, confident that the United States will not be in a position to do much about it.

The bottom line is that the political and security environment for the KRG is going to become more hostile following the U.S. withdrawal. However, given the state of U.S. public opinion, there was never a likelihood of a lasting American military presence to provide Kurdistan with greater security. The daunting challenge for the KRG will be to operate successfully in a neighborhood that has just become more dangerous and unpredictable.