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Obama speech will tout end of combat operations in Iraq

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President Obama will use a major address next Tuesday to tout the end of combat operations in Iraq and the start of a new phase of diplomacy and complete withdrawal.

It was not clear whether Obama would deliver his speech from Baghdad, Washington, or some other setting. The White House said the venue was uncertain although the Aug. 31 date was chosen to underscore the administration's success in bringing the mission to a close on deadline.

"After Sept. 1st, the United States will have a different mission, one of advising and assisting Iraqi security forces, joining the Iraqis in targeted counterterrorism operations and protecting U.S. troops and civilians who remain in Iraq," said John Brennan, assistant to the president for counterterrorism and homeland security.

But even as they roll out the Iraq story ahead of midterm elections, the White House is being careful to calibrate the message.

Aiming to blunt Republican critics noting the Iraq troop surge was his predecessor's policy, administration officials are taking care not to overtly take credit for Iraq -- even as Obama increasingly associates himself with bringing the war in safely and on time.

"This reaches the goal that was set by the president last February, as part of his efforts to responsibly draw down our forces from Iraq and transition to Iraqi security forces the responsibility for security in that country," Brennan said.

As a candidate, Obama called Iraq a "dumb war" and a "rash war," and opposed former President Bush's 2007 troop surge.

"I expect the administration will try to present its Iraq policy as a blazing success, while minimizing the contributions of the previous administration, which really made the hard decisions that produced that success," said Jim Phillips, an expert on the Middle East at the Heritage Foundation.

Administration officials said that as of Tuesday, troop levels are below 50,000 in Iraq after peaking at about 170,000 during the 2007 troop surge.

Mindful of Bush's catastrophic "mission accomplished" misstep, the administration is saying that technically, the war in Iraq is not really over.

"Right now we still have two theaters of military operations -- Iraq and Afghanistan," Brennan said.

At the same time, the White House is sounding like it is locked into a timetable for pulling out all remaining troops next year. Gen. Ray Odierno, commander of U.S. forces in Iraq, went off script recently by suggesting the mission may have to continue if security falls apart.

"We've made a commitment ... to have our troops out by the end of 2011, and that's a commitment we intend to keep," said White House deputy press secretary Bill Burton.

But the administration's heavy emphasis on the end of combat operations is not matched by optimism about the prospects for forming a functional Iraqi government -- a process one expert on the region described as "constipated."

"Iraq is very rocky soil to plant democratic seeds, and the Iraqis need a lot of help in building a supportive political culture," said Phillips.

Christopher Preble, director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, said Iraq should be left to figure out its political future on its own, without outside meddling.

"If the perception is that the political settlement in Iraq is in any way bowing to the wishes of the U.S., then it's not a durable settlement," Preble said.

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