

Last Post in Iraq

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US sounded its last post in Iraq on December 16, 2011 although as per the US–Iraq Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) it was to be carried out by December 31, 2011. SOFA stipulated that the US combat forces would withdraw from Iraqi cities by June 30, 2009 and all US forces will leave Iraq by December 31, 2011. The agreement also laid down that charges had to be filed for holding prisoners over 24 hours and required a warrant for carrying out search in areas not related to combat. It also provided protection to the US citizens who were carrying out legitimate activity on behalf of the US. The agreement expired at midnight of December 31, 2011. The Iraqi government also approved a Strategic Framework Agreement with the US, aimed at ensuring international cooperation including minority ethnicity, gender, and belief interests and other constitutional rights; threat deterrence; student exchange; education; and cooperation in the areas of energy development, environmental hygiene, health care, information technology, communications, and law enforcement. Many Iraqis protested against SOFA when it was passed as it prolonged and legitimised the occupation. Others expressed skepticism over US’ intentions of completely ending its presence by 2011 but President Obama has kept his part of the bargain.

SOFA

Parent states of the US led Coalition Forces in Iraq had exclusive jurisdiction of their defence forces. However, after the handing over of Iraq to an Iraqi administration, coalition forces were nominally subject to Iraqi jurisdiction and operated without any SOFA. In theory, Iraqi courts had the right to try coalition forces for any alleged offences, though this right was never exercised. The process of coming to an agreement had its trying moments. On June 13, 2008,

Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki said that negotiations with the US on a long-term security pact were deadlocked because of concerns that the deal infringes Iraqi sovereignty. “We have reached an impasse because when we opened these negotiations we did not realise that the US demands would so deeply affect Iraqi sovereignty and this is something we can never accept”, he said in Amman, Jordan. “We cannot allow US forces to have the right to jail Iraqis or assume, alone, the responsibility of fighting against terrorism”, Maliki told Jordanian newspaper editors. On October 16, 2008, after several more months of negotiations, the then US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice briefed senior US lawmakers on the draft SOFA, and Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki circulated it to Iraq’s Political National Security Council before going on to the Council of Ministers and the Iraqi parliament. Despite a compromise on the issue of jurisdiction over off-duty US troops who commit crimes under Iraqi law, issues related to the timeline for US withdrawal and Iraqi insistence on “absolute sovereignty” remained. On November 16, 2008, Iraq’s Cabinet approved the agreement, which gave the deadline of 2009 for the pull out of US troops from Iraqi cities and 2011 as the deadline for removal of US military presence in Iraq. US concessions involved a ban on the US forces searching and raiding homes without Iraqi approval, the right of Iraqis to search shipments of weapons and packages entering the country for US recipients, and the right of Iraq’s justice system to prosecute US troops for serious crimes under some circumstances. The Aswat al-Iraq news agency reported a mixed reaction among the Iraqi population. The same day, Secretaries Gates and Rice held a closed door classified briefing for US lawmakers. Democratic Representative William Delahunt said: “There has been no meaningful consultation with Congress during the negotiations of this agreement and the American people for all intents and purposes have been completely left out.”

Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki warned that Iraq would not seek to extend the UN mandate of US troops and they would pull out immediately if the Iraqi parliament failed to approve a pact. Tariq al Hashimi, the country’s Sunni Muslim vice president, complained that the US would cease providing many “wide-scale services” if Iraq did not approve the pact and added that many Iraqis looked “to this attitude as a matter of blackmailing.” On November 27, 2008, the Iraqi Parliament ratified SOFA with the US, establishing that US combat forces will withdraw from Iraqi cities by June 30, 2009, and all US forces will be completely out of Iraq by December 31, 2011. It was also stipulated that further negotiations will be carried out if the Iraqi Prime Minister believed that Iraq is not stable

enough. On December 4, 2008 Iraq's Presidential Council approved the security pact.

The then US President George W. Bush hailed the passing of the agreement between the two countries. "The Security Agreement addresses our presence, activities, and withdrawal from Iraq", Bush said. He continued that, "two years ago, this day seemed unlikely - but the success of the surge and the courage of the Iraqi people set the conditions for these two agreements to be negotiated and approved by the Iraqi parliament."

From the beginning

President Bush had been exploring options for retaliation against Iraq after 9/11 and by middle of December 2001, he had made up his mind to overthrow Saddam Hussein. There was considerable international opposition for any military action against Iraq; however the US military buildup started secretly for operations against Saddam Hussein and by mid 2002, it intensified.

Twenty Six Fateful Days of Operation Iraqi Freedom

It took 26 days to crush the regime of Saddam Hussein and achieve the military objectives. However, it has taken about 8 years and 9 months after Operation Iraqi Freedom to achieve a pale semblance of the objectives of removing terrorism and establishing democracy. During these eight plus years, insurgency has picked up, increased angst due to poor humanitarian aid, effect of prolonged sanctions effecting basic quality of life and heightened resentment against the US occupation. Conflict between the Shia, Sunni and Kurd emerged strongly, gathered momentum and got converted into a resistance movement by diverse groups who were fighting against occupation as well as a civil war for the control of Iraq.

President Bush had signed the launch order at 6:30 PM EST (Eastern Standard Time), on March 19, 2003. The main operation started at 5.34 AM local time on March 20, 2003 when US and UK launched 40 cruise missiles and air strikes led by two F-117's with the twin objectives of removing WMD's (weapons of mass destruction) and overthrowing the regime of Saddam Hussein. The early targets were elements of Iraqi regime and refueling facilities. About three hours after the strikes, President Saddam Hussein appeared on Iraqi TV and urged the Iraqi people to defend their country and predicted victory. It was not possible to ascertain whether the broadcast was live. Prior to the initial strikes, Special Forces of US and UK were operating in Iraq to establish contact with the opposing

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forces and gather intelligence. Air raids continued on all important targets like missile sites, communication nodes, command and control centres. At 3:57 PM local time, the first fire fight took place between US and Iraqi troops. As the offensive progressed US and UK marines captured Umm Qasr, an important sea port 30 miles south of Basra. By March 21, gas oil separation plants (GOSPs), crude oil export facilities and oil wells in Rumaylah were secured. Six major GOSPs and seven oil wells were set on fire by Iraqis but firefighting crews moved in and put off the fire.

An Iraqi division consisting of 8000 troops including their commander surrendered and was made prisoners of war (POW). The oil infra-structure was booby trapped in many places but was secured intact by timely action. As the operations progressed during the day, the air operations were intensified by launching hundreds of aircrafts and cruise missiles on Iraqi leadership and military targets. Only precision guided munitions (PGMs) were used to minimise collateral damage as compared to Operation Desert Storm where less than 10 per cent PGMs were used. By end of the third day, about 14,000 Iraqi soldiers had surrendered. The first successful armed UAV strike of the US Air Force took place when a MQ-1 Predator destroyed an Iraqi AA mobile gun system with AGM-114 Hell fire II missile. Operations slowed down on sixth and seventh day due to heavy sand storms. About 1000 Iraqi casualties were estimated in the vicinity of Najaf and about 8900 POW were taken. One of the three major oil refineries i.e. the Basra oil refinery was captured on the eighth day. By the eleventh day Baghdad was being bombarded regularly and ground forces started operations around the key cities of Nasiriyah, Samawal, Najaf and Karbala. So far, only a cache of equipment had been found for defensive chemical warfare but other chemical, nuclear and biological weapons had not been found. On the dawn of the twelfth day (March 31), Najaf airfield was also captured. The fourteenth day saw the coalition forces about 50 km from the southern outskirts of Baghdad.

April 4, saw the capture of Saddam (Baghdad) International Airport and the attack on Baghdad continued. On April 5, coalition aircraft struck at the residence of Ali Hassan al-Majid who was the cousin of Saddam Hussein and nick named, 'Chemical Ali', as he ordered the use of chemical weapons against the Kurds. He was arrested by the US forces on August 17, 2003, underwent a prolonged trial and was executed by hanging on January 25, 2010. The first

aircraft, a C-130, landed during late evening at Baghdad International Airport. Basra fell by April, 7. The coalition forces continued to consolidate their position in Baghdad. Operations continued to secure northern oil fields and a military airport near Kirkuk. Looting and street violence continued in Baghdad, Tikrit and Mosul. General Amir Saadi surrendered to US soldiers in Baghdad on April 12. He was the highest ranking officer to surrender so far. All major oil sites in northern Iraq were under coalition control. On the 26th day of the operations (April 14), US forces captured Tikrit, the last stronghold of Saddam Hussein. His village, Auja was subjected to heavy air raids and ground attacks. A majority of the petroleum facilities were under coalition control and no oil wells were under fire.

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The major combat operations ended on May 1, but military action continued as there had been terrorist strikes and fidayeen action on daily basis. The Iraqi cauldron of Shiite, Sunni and Kurds continued to simmer in spite of an elected government in place and Saddam Hussein being captured (he was hanged on December 29, 2006.) The objective of overthrowing Saddam Hussein had been achieved and in any case there were no WMD's in the first place. Conventional war was over but the war on terrorism started in real earnest.

Coalition Provisional Authority director L. Paul Bremer signed over sovereignty to the appointed Iraqi Interim Government on June 28, 2004. The current government of Iraq took office on May 20, 2006. The government succeeded the Iraqi Transitional Government which had continued in office in a caretaker capacity until the formation of the permanent government.

On August 31, 2010, President Obama announced the end of Operation Iraqi Freedom from the Oval Office. In his address, he covered his next year's plan for closing operations in Afghanistan, the role of the US' soft power, the effect on US economy and the legacy of US wars.

At a ceremony held on December 15, 2011, US Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta marked the withdrawal of US Forces with a speech in a fortified concrete courtyard at the Baghdad airport. Helicopters hovered above carrying out surveillance in a scenario where insurgents continued to attack US soldiers and militants with Al Qaeda still carry out devastating attacks against civilians with regular frequency. At the height of the war in 2007, there were 505 bases and more than 170,000 troops. After withdrawal of US Forces, two bases with roughly 4,000 troops remained. These were subjected to constant attack, mainly by artillery and

mortar fire and by roadside bombs aimed at convoys heading south toward Kuwait. These too were closed by December 31, 2011, leaving just a few hundred military personnel and Pentagon civilians working within the US Embassy as part of an Office of Security Cooperation to assist in arms sales and training to the Iraqis.

Iraq Death Toll

Iraq Body Count Project is an independent UK/US group that compiles Iraqi civilian deaths. The cause of deaths includes invasion and occupation, direct military action by coalition forces, insurgency and excess crime. These estimates vary from 99,004 to 108,076 and covers the period up to December 2, 2010. The figures vary depending on the organisation involved in the body count but the fact remains that the death toll of the civilians is very high. Based on Iraq Coalition Casualty Count, military fatalities of Coalition Forces is 4,802 out of which US has the largest contribution of 4,484. Pentagon estimates are that US casualties were 4,487 with 32,226 wounded in action.

Financial Costs

Estimates of financial cost are very difficult to make out by outside agencies. Only the US Government would know the actual costs involved but even for them it will be difficult to calculate the indirect costs. Congressional Budget Office has estimated that the total cost of the war in Iraq to US taxpayers will be around USD 1.9 trillion. As per Congress Research Service, the war in Iraq has cost USD 823.2 billion since 2003. The cost in 2011 was USD 49.3 billion, only 4 billion less than the cost incurred in 2003 when the invasion started. This is a very high price to pay for achieving the military and civilian objectives, and it really reflects on the way the US economy is running to ground.

Refugees Crisis

As of November 4, 2006, the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees had estimated that till November 2006, 1.8 million Iraqis had been displaced to neighboring countries, and 1.6 million were displaced internally. Over 3.9 million people (about 16 per cent of the Iraqi population) had become uprooted. Of these, around 2 million have fled Iraq and 1.9 million are estimated to be refugees inside Iraq. Western nations have accepted a miniscule percentage to their countries as refugees. UN has stated that approximately 40 per cent of Iraq's middle class is believed to have fled. All sections of people, from university professors to bakers, have been targeted by militias, Iraqi insurgents and criminals.

Realistic Appraisal after Withdrawal

Weapons of Mass Destruction: The realistic appraisal brings on the table a mixed package. The first objective to recover weapons of mass destruction was achieved before even the operations started as none were discovered during the prolonged searches carried out. Was it faulty intelligence or deliberate subterfuge to find a reason to attack Saddam Hussein?

Democracy: The second objective was to make Iraq a democratic country. Before World War I, Iraq was part of the Ottoman Empire with three separate provinces based on Baghdad, Basra and Mosul. It was ethnically diverse and remains so even today with Shiite Arabs, Sunni Arabs, Muslim (Shiite and Sunni) Kurds, Assyrians, Yazidi Kurds and Turkmen with Shiite in majority (about 60-65 per cent). On November 11, 1920 Iraq became a League of Nations mandate under British control with the name “State of Iraq”. Britain granted independence to Iraq in 1932, though they retained military bases and transit rights for their forces. Since then it has had five coup d’état and one military occupation. It was also invaded by Britain during May 1941 as they feared that the Rashid Ali government might cutoff oil supplies to Western nations because of his links to the Axis powers. Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party and Saddam Hussein have been in control of Iraq since July 1979. Saddam Hussein was a brutal dictator but kept Iraq’s diverse elements together with his authoritarian leadership in spite of being a Sunni in a majority Shiite nation. US argued that a brutal dictator has been removed to make way for the first real democracy in the Arab world. It was a laudable objective considering that the Arab World has hardly any democratic form of government. Iraq now has a democracy, with Shiites in power. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has made an effort to include Sunni Arabs and Kurds in his coalition to make it a truly representative government. However terrorist attacks on Shiites continue.

Even before the dust of the last US convoy settled down, political turmoil started. The Shiite majority government issued an arrest warrant for its own Sunni Vice President. Tariq al-Hashimi, on the charges of running a private death squad for the assassination of security officials and government bureaucrats. Hashimi denied the charges and in fact accused the Prime Minister of using government machinery to persecute political opponents – read Sunnis. The situation became more complicated as Hashimi was in the autonomous region of Kurd at that time, where the warrants could not be served. He could not return to Baghdad due to the fear of arrest and became an exile in his own country. Maliki threatened to abandon the US backed power sharing government and warned Kurdish leaders

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that there would be “problems” if they did not hand over Mr. Hashimi. Even before the official deadline of December 31 was over, a powerful Shiite political group led by the anti-US cleric Muktada al-Sadr called for Parliament to be dissolved and early elections to be held. The strife of power and share of the spoils has widened sectarian and political conflicts. US has promised to assist with security forces if required but only time will tell whether this fledgling democracy will stabilise and grow. US may have not made many friends in the Sunni Arab world by installing a Shiite government. At the same time Iran is a powerful Shiite Muslim theocratic state and must be eyeing Iraq to increase its influence over this fledgling democracy.

Terrorism and Insurgency: Terrorism and insurgency grew during the Gulf War and also became more innovative. IEDs caused the heaviest casualties to the coalition forces in Iraq. The experience in Afghanistan is similar. Conflict between the Shia and Sunnis has also widened, despite withdrawal of the US forces. Violence is still endemic in the northern cities of Kirkuk and Mosul, where many groups strive for control. Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia had released a statement after the killing of Osama bin Laden that it had begun a 100 attack campaign to exact revenge for the killing. It appears they are holding to their word as car bombings and attacks have relentlessly continued. Al Qaeda’s Iraqi arm has carried out a number of spectacular bombings over the past year and some intelligence analysts fear it is in resurgence.

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