

Obama Meets Iraqi Leader to Chart Broad Shifts

Mark Landler and John H. Cushman



WASHINGTON — President Obama, meeting with Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki at the White House on Monday, said the emergence of Iraq as a “sovereign, self-reliant and democratic” nation nine years after the American-led invasion had created a beacon of democracy in the Arab world.

When the Arab League meets in Baghdad next year for the first time in decades, he said, “people throughout the region will see a new Iraq that’s determining its own destiny.”

The two leaders appeared at a news conference after a morning of meetings as the two governments marked a landmark shift in their relationship with the withdrawal of American troops. In a signal of the enduring security relationship, the United States said it would supply additional F-16 fighter jets to Iraq, helping rebuild an Air Force that was destroyed by the war.

“After nearly nine years, our war in Iraq ends this month,” Mr. Obama said.

Having opposed that war at the outset and campaigned on a platform of ending it, Mr. Obama in effect was highlighting an outcome that some who favored the war predicted at its onset: that it would create a model of democracy in a region where it had rarely thrived. He said Iraq “can be a model for others who are aspiring to build democracy,” and that this justified the American expenditure “of blood and treasure” there.

History will judge whether the war was a mistake to begin with, he said, but all the sacrifice had created “enormous potential.”

The leaders also discussed Iraq’s neighbor Syria, where the Obama administration has demanded that President Bashar al-Assad relinquish power and favors sanctions to force an end to a brutal crackdown on antigovernment protesters that has left at least 4,000 dead.

Mr. Maliki, saying that Iraq favored democracy and supported the "aspirations of the Syrian people," said he did not have "the right to ask a president to abdicate" and did not favor an embargo.

Mr. Obama said that he respected Mr. Maliki's position.

"We may have some different tactical views in terms of how best to transition to an inclusive representative government inside of Syria, but every decision that I believe Prime Minister Maliki is making, he is making on the basis of what he thinks is best for the Iraqi people," he said.

Mr. Maliki, speaking through an interpreter, said that cooperation was still needed, especially in matters of security: combating terrorism, training security forces, and equipping the Iraqi army "to protect our sovereignty."

In a few weeks, the American military force that invaded almost nine years ago and still numbered 170,000 in 2007 will have shriveled to a vestigial presence, and both men emphasized that the partnership between Washington and the government it nurtured in Baghdad will proceed to a more normal relationship.

In their meetings, officials said, the two leaders faced a broad agenda intended to reinforce the new partnership. In addition to regional security issues, Mr. Maliki and Mr. Obama had to deal with trade, energy, American investment in Iraq and education.

Still, security issues topped the list of mutual concerns. The administration has left open the door to future training missions, in which Iraqi troops would take part in American exercises outside Iraq or American troops would rotate into the country for specific training exercises. Iraq has contracted to buy 18 F-16 fighter jets from the United States, and American pilots will train Iraqi pilots to fly them.

Administration officials have emphasized that the United States will not redeploy troops to Iraq to be stationed there, though the shape of American involvement depends on negotiations with Mr. Maliki's government.

The remaining international participants in the United Nations-sponsored force there are also stepping aside, as NATO said it would pull the last training detachment out by year-end.

All the non-American contingents of the large multinational force for Iraq had withdrawn by the end of May. At its peak, more than three dozen countries were involved in the war effort, contributing tens of thousands of troops. They were led by core NATO members like Britain, France and Canada, but included even tiny nations like Tonga, Honduras and Estonia.

The non-American part of the coalition had gradually withdrawn to more secure areas. The last allied death was that of a British soldier in 2009, according to the Web site icasualties.org.

A separate entity, the NATO Training Mission-Iraq, still had nearly 200 troops in Iraq as of late this year, and had hoped to remain longer, according to a statement on its Web site. But the alliance announced on Monday that an agreement with authorities in Baghdad had proved elusive, despite "robust negotiations conducted over several weeks." All of the mission's troops will leave by Dec. 31.

NATO declared the training mission, in which all 28 of its member countries had participated, "a success," saying that it had trained more than 5,000 military personnel and 10,000 police officers, while "contributing to Iraq's security capacity and helping to develop a more sustainable, multiethnic security force."

The American military, too, had hoped that a more robust training force would be invited to stay next year. But the two sides were unable to reach terms on an agreement that might have allowed that.

Other issues that remain unresolved include the status of Camp Ashraf, where thousands of dissident Iranians have been labeled as terrorists and kept under internment; and what will happen to the last remaining prisoner being held by the American military in Iraq, Ali Musa Daqduq, a Lebanese suspected of being a Hezbollah operative and accused of involvement in a 2007 raid by Shiite militants in Karbala that resulted in the deaths of five American soldiers.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton joined Mr. Obama at the White House meeting with Mr. Maliki on Monday, after having met him the night before at Blair House. Later she was scheduled to meet with Iraq's foreign minister, Hoshyar Zebari, to inaugurate a newly created Joint Coordination Committee, which will oversee relations after the last troops leave this month.

Other members of the Iraqi delegation, according to Mr. Maliki's office, included Minister of Transport Hadi Farhan al-Amiri, Minister of Trade Khairallah Babiker, Minister of Culture and Defense Saadoun al-Dulaimi, National Security Adviser Faleh al-Fayad, and the president of the National Investment Commission Sami Raouf al-Araji.

Fonte: The New York Times, New York, 12 Dec. 2011, Internacional, online.

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