



Iraqi Parliament's Debate on US Pact Disrupted

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BAGHDAD (AP) -- Lawmakers loyal to Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr on Wednesday disrupted a parliamentary debate ahead of a Nov. 24 vote on a U.S.-Iraqi security agreement that would keep American troops in Iraq for three more years.

Speaker Mahmoud al-Mashhadani adjourned the session until Thursday after Sadrist lawmaker Ahmed al-Massoudi aggressively approached a lawmaker from the ruling coalition who was reading aloud the text of the agreement.

Al-Massoudi appeared to be on the verge of grabbing the document as lawmaker Hassan al-Sineid read it. Personal guards of Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari, seated next to al-Sineid, stopped al-Massoudi from reaching the bench.

The Sadrists oppose the agreement, which enjoys the support of the ruling coalition.

Thursday's session was stormy from the start, with Sadrist lawmakers constantly trying to disrupt the proceedings. Al-Mashhadani was involved in several shouting matches with the Sadrists, who demanded that a draft bill regulating the adoption of treaties with foreign nations be adopted ahead of the debate on the security agreement.

The 275-seat legislature does not have much time to adopt the security pact, and the Sadrists' tactic appears designed to take advantage of that to derail the agreement. Al-Sadr has a long history of conflict with the United States, launching several uprisings against U.S. forces since they occupied Iraq in 2003.

The legislature is expected to go into recess in early December for the Muslim feast of Eid al-Adha. At that time, scores of lawmakers will travel to Saudi Arabia for the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, denying the house a quorum to debate or vote on the pact.

If the agreement is approved by parliament, it will go to the president and his two deputies for ratification. Each one -- President Jalal Talabani and vice presidents Adel Abdul-Mahdi and Tariq al-Hashemi -- has the power to veto the agreement.

Failing to adopt it will leave the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki no choice but to seek the renewal of a U.N. mandate under which American and other foreign forces operate in Iraq.

The Sadrist disruption in parliament followed an announcement by the small Shiite Fadhila party that it would not vote in support of the agreement. Fadhila has 15 lawmakers.

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's ruling coalition dominates the legislature, so the security pact is virtually assured of a parliamentary majority despite the opposition of Fadhila's lawmakers and the nearly 30 loyal to al-Sadr. The Cabinet approved the deal with Washington on Sunday.

The complaints of the Fadhila party and the Sadrists' vehement opposition, however, reflect unease among some Iraqis about a continuing U.S. presence in their country after years of war, even if a clear timetable for their withdrawal is laid out in the deal.

The Fadhila party, which is largely based in the southern city of Basra, complained that it had not been kept informed of developments during months of negotiations.

It also cited alleged ambiguities in the agreement and questioned the commitment of the United States to help rid Iraq of billions of dollars it owes in loans dating from the rule of dictator Saddam Hussein.

"We cannot vote in favor of the security agreement," said Hassan al-Shimari, a senior Fadhila lawmaker.

Like the Sadrists, Fadhila is at odds with parliament's main Shiite bloc. Both quit the bloc last year to protest their exclusion from policy decisions.

Al-Maliki went on national television Tuesday to defend the agreement. He acknowledged that he had "reservations" about the pact, but said it paved the way for the restoration of full sovereignty after the last U.S. soldier leaves Iraq at the end of 2011.

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Also Wednesday, the U.S. military announced the arrest of an alleged senior member of Iran's elite security forces suspected of funneling arms into Iraq.

The alleged member of the elite Quds force of Iran's Revolutionary Guards was detained Tuesday by Iraqi police at Baghdad International Airport while he was trying to leave the country, the military said.

The suspect was working for an organization allegedly tied to the Quds force that uses the construction and repair of religious sites in Iraq as cover to funnel arms into the country "in legitimate shipments of building materials," the military said.

The U.S. said the arms were destined for an extremist group in Iraq.

Washington has accused Iran of training and arming Shiite extremist groups in Iraq and fueling the insurgency. Tehran denies the charges.

South of Baghdad, a memorial service was held Wednesday in the Shiite holy city of Najaf as the remains of about 150 victims of a crackdown against Kurds under Saddam were taken to the Kurdish city of Irbil in northern Iraq.

Government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh said the victims found in a mass grave were believed to have been executed and had come from the Kurdish province of Sulaimaniyah.

Hundreds of thousands of Kurds were killed or expelled from northern Iraq during the so-called Anfal campaign in the 1980s.

By Qassim Abdul-Zahra

Associated Press reporter Saad Abdul-Kadir contributed to this report.

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