



Why the US Blinked on Its Troop Agreement With Iraq

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WASHINGTON -- Although the Pentagon officially has welcomed the new accord on a U.S. troop withdrawal from Iraq, senior military officials are privately criticizing President Bush for giving Iraq more control over U.S. military operations for the next three years than the U.S. had ever contemplated.

Officials said U.S. negotiators had failed to understand how the two countries' political timetables would force the U.S. to make major concessions that relinquish much of the control over U.S. forces in Iraq. They said President Bush gave in to Iraqi demands to avoid leaving the decisions to his successor, Barack Obama.

At times, "President Bush wanted this deal more than the Iraqis did," said a senior administration official who closely monitored the negotiations.

This official, and others, all who spoke anonymously to be candid, offered a first glimpse into the dynamics of the secret negotiations, which gave Iraq almost unprecedented control over U.S. troops in the period between Jan. 1 and a final U.S. withdrawal from Iraq on Dec. 31, 2011.

As part of the accord, which U.S. and Iraqi officials signed in Baghdad on Monday, Iraq will have potential authority over U.S. military operations, intelligence-gathering, cargo shipments and even the mail sent to American troops. Foreign contractors are subject to Iraqi law. On Jan. 1, Iraq will assume control of the U.S.-fortified Green Zone in Baghdad, and of the nation's airspace.

The officials said the biggest factor in the outcome was the Iraq government's decision to re-schedule provincial elections from October until the end of January, which gave its negotiators strong arguments to drive a hard bargain.

At the same time in Washington, political pressures generated by Obama's victory, first in the primaries and then in the general election, led Bush to meet the Iraqi demands.

The Bush administration had sought a conventional status of forces agreement that would provide a semi-permanent basis for stationing troops in Iraq, while Obama campaigned on promises to withdraw all combat troops within 16 months of his inauguration. The Arabic language version calls the final agreement a withdrawal accord.

Publicly, the Defense Department defended the agreement on Wednesday, and top officials said they're comfortable with the final document, according to a senior Pentagon aide. "They wouldn't have signed off otherwise."

Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Marine Gen. James Cartwright, the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, went to Capitol Hill Wednesday to explain the agreement, which still must be ratified by Iraq's parliament, though not by the U.S. Congress.

Adm. Michael Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said Monday that he was comfortable with the terms of the agreement and that it adequately protects U.S. troops.

The White House defended what it called a "mutually agreed to agreement." Spokeswoman Dana Perino said: "We asked for some things that we didn't get, they asked for some things that they didn't get. And we met them somewhere right in the middle."

Pentagon officials, however, said the White House made unprecedented concessions. In addition to allowing Iraq to search cargo and mail under some conditions, the deal bars U.S. forces from launching attacks on other countries from Iraqi soil and permits Iraq to prosecute U.S. military contractors, and in some cases perhaps also American troops, under Iraqi law.

Both sides began working on the deal in the spring, months before the expiration of the United Nations Security Council resolution that allows U.S. forces to operate in Iraq. At the time, the Iraqi government was feeling empowered by its military success against Shiite militias in the southern Iraqi city of Basra. But Washington adamantly opposed concessions to the Iraqis, said a senior military officer who closely monitored the negotiations.

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The provincial elections, which will reshape Iraq's political map, were then scheduled for October. But around July, the Iraqi government postponed them until January, and Iraqi politicians realized they could not agree to anything less than a full withdrawal and still win the elections. As Iraqis began asking for more conditions, U.S. negotiators wouldn't relent, the officer said.

Some at the White House blamed an obstinate Pentagon. Pentagon officials said the White House didn't understand what was happening on the ground. "Baghdad looks very different from Washington," the officer told McClatchy. An administration official objected to that characterization, but said "we wasted four or five months."

Last month, both sides appeared to agree on a document. However, the Iraqis rejected the document again and demanded the right to search mail and cargo, control airspace and remove any conditions for a withdrawal.

As Obama's chances to be elected president improved, the White House felt it was under more pressure. Neither the administration nor the Iraqis wanted to extend the U.N. resolution. "It turned into a very peculiar political predicament," the officer said.

"There are a lot of safeguards and caveats on things that some are concerned about," said the senior Pentagon aide. "It sounds like a big giveaway but it's not."

The White House is expected to release an English translation of the agreement as early as Thursday.

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