



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on June 12, 2011

Panetta: Iraq Likely to Request U.S. Troops Stay On

The [BBC](#) reports that during his June 9 confirmation hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Panetta said, “It’s clear to me that Iraq is considering the possibility of making a request for some kind of [troop] presence to remain there.” He added that he had “every confidence that a request like that will be forthcoming.”



He should be confident: The Obama administration has for months now been pressuring the Iraqi government, particularly Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, to permit U.S. forces to remain in the country beyond the end of the current Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), which was negotiated in 2008. Maliki, who knows that U.S. troops are not particularly welcome in Iraq and that acceding to U.S. demands would make him look like an American stooge, told the [Wall Street Journal](#) in December that the SOFA was “not subject to extension, not subject to alteration” — a stance he [reiterated](#) to Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Adm. Michael Mullen in April.

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The Obama administration, however, was undaunted. In early April Gates flew to Baghdad and “met with Iraq’s top leaders ... to deliver a message: The U.S. is willing to stay beyond 2011, if invited,” according to the *Journal*. While not specifying how many troops might remain, he did say that it would be “a fraction” of the 47,000 troops currently in the country. He also [suggested](#) that even after the residual force had mostly been sent home, the United States might “have a continuing advise-and-assist role” in Iraq “that just becomes part of a regular military-to-military relationship.” In other words, some U.S. troops could stay in Iraq in perpetuity. (That Gates would seek a permanent U.S. presence in Iraq is not surprising; he also [said](#) that U.S. forces are “not ever leaving [Afghanistan] at all.”)

By mid-May Maliki had begun to change his tune, [saying](#) that he would agree to extend the SOFA if at least 70 percent of Iraq’s leadership also favored the extension — a nearly complete reversal of his previous stance.

What explains Maliki’s change of heart? The BBC writes that its Washington correspondent, Andrew North, “says it seems likely that the US has offered Iraq some inducements to maintain its troop presence.” Those “inducements” could be either offers of additional aid or threats of arranging for Maliki to be removed from power, if not killed. Maliki undoubtedly recalls what happened to his predecessor, former U.S. ally Saddam Hussein, when Washington no longer had need of him.



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Back in 2002, Illinois State Senator Barack Obama [opposed](#) the invasion of Iraq, calling it “a dumb war” and “a rash war.” “Even a successful war against Iraq,” he added, “will require a U.S. occupation of undetermined length, at undetermined cost, with undetermined consequences” — all of which he clearly considered negatives. Given the opportunity as President to bring that occupation to an end, however, Obama instead seeks to extend it, thereby adding to its cost and consequences as well.

May we please have the 2002 model back?

Photo of U.S. soldier in Iraq: Department of Defense



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