



Written by [Gary Benoit](#) on February 27, 2009

## Obama's "Transitional Force" for Iraq

"Let me say this as plainly as I can: by August 31, 2010, our combat mission in Iraq will end," President Barack Obama announced in his February 27 remarks at Camp Lejeune. "As a candidate for President," he recalled, "I made clear my support for a timeline of 16 months to carry out this drawdown, while pledging to consult closely with our military commanders upon taking office to ensure that we preserve the gains we've made and protect our troops. Those consultations are now complete, and I have chosen a timeline that will remove our combat brigades over the next 18 months." That is, 19 months after taking office.



However, the president remarked at the North Carolina Marine Corps Base that up to 50,000 U.S. soldiers will remain in Iraq after "our combat mission in Iraq" has ended. The president explained a continuing U.S. military presence thusly: "Our mission will change from combat to supporting the Iraqi government and its Security Forces as they take the absolute lead in securing their country. As I have long said, we will retain a transitional force to carry out three distinct functions: training, equipping, and advising Iraqi Security Forces as long as they remain non-sectarian; conducting targeted counter-terrorism missions; and protecting our ongoing civilian and military efforts within Iraq. Initially, this force will likely be made up of 35-50,000 U.S. troops."

During the campaign, Obama promised to "safely redeploy combat brigades from Iraq at a pace of 1 to 2 brigades a month that would remove them in 16 months." He later said that "a residual force will remain in Iraq and in the region to conduct targeted counter-terrorism missions against al Qaeda in Iraq." But a "residual force" of up to 50,000 soldiers — which would be more than a third of the 142,000 U.S. troops currently in Iraq — is quite a "residual force" to say the least.

Is this what the American people were expecting President Obama would do? How about congressional leaders? Reuters quoted Democratic Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid as saying that the number is "higher than I had anticipated" and Democratic Representative Lynn Woolsey as saying that it's "unacceptable." On the other hand, Reuters reported, Republican Senator John McCain said: "Overall it is a reasonable plan and one that can work and I support it." During the campaign, Senator McCain was widely viewed as being hawkish on the Iraq War while then-Senator Obama was perceived as being anti-Iraq War.

Obama also said during his Camp Lejeune remarks that "under the Status of Forces Agreement with the Iraqi government, I intend to remove all U.S. troops from Iraq by the end of 2011." Under that agreement, which was negotiated last year when President George W. Bush was still in office, all U.S. forces are supposed to be out of Iraq by that time.

Meanwhile, the United States is sending more U.S. military forces to Afghanistan, effectively shifting to Afghanistan the "war on terrorism" that has been mainly focused on Iraq.



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