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War in Iraq Defies U.S. Timetable for End of Combat

By **TIM ARANGO**

NEAR TULUL AL-BAQ, Iraq — [President Obama](#) has set an August deadline for the end of the combat mission in [Iraq](#). Here at this makeshift desert camp in the insurgent badlands of northern Iraq, a mission is under way that is not going to stop then: American soldiers hunting terrorists and covertly watching an Iraqi checkpoint staffed by police officers whom the soldiers say they do not trust.

“They’re not checking anybody, and they’re wondering why I.E.D.’s are getting in to town,” said Staff Sgt. Kelly E. Young, 39, from Albertville, Ala., as he watched the major roadway that connects Baghdad with Mosul, regarded as the country’s [most dangerous city](#). He referred to [improvised explosive devices](#), the military term for homemade bombs.

The August deadline might be seen back home as a milestone in the fulfillment of President Obama’s promise to end the war in Iraq, but here it is more complex. American soldiers still find and kill enemy fighters, on their own and in partnership with Iraqi security forces, and will continue to do so after the official end of combat operations. More Americans are certain to die, if significantly fewer than in the height of fighting here.

The withdrawal, which will reduce the number of American troops to 50,000 — from 112,000 earlier this year and close to 165,000 at the height of the surge — is a feat of logistics that has been called the biggest movement of matériel since World War II. It is also an exercise in semantics.

What soldiers today would call combat operations — hunting insurgents, joint raids between

Iraqi security forces and United States Special Forces to kill or arrest militants — will be called “stability operations.” Post-reduction, the United States military says the focus will be on advising and training Iraqi soldiers, providing security for civilian reconstruction teams and joint counterterrorism missions.

“In practical terms, nothing will change,” said Maj. Gen. Stephen R. Lanza, the top American military spokesman in Iraq. “We are already doing stability operations.” Americans ceased major combat in Iraq long ago, and that has been reflected in the number of casualties. So far this year, 14 soldiers have been killed by hostile fire, and 27 more from accidents, suicides and other noncombat causes, according to icasualties.org.

As fighting involving Americans tapered off, thousands of items of Iraq war [matériel were packed and shipped](#) to Afghanistan. The complex and flexible mission of cutting down forces while simultaneously keeping up the fight with a festering insurgency could prove a model for Afghanistan, where withdrawal is scheduled to begin next year. Next summer, the Americans will begin to leave Afghanistan, too, and they probably won't be able to halt fighting completely as they do so.

Beyond August the next Iraq deadline is the end of 2011, when all American troops are supposed to be gone. But few believe that America's military involvement in Iraq will end then. The conventional wisdom among military officers, diplomats and Iraqi officials is that after a new government is formed, talks will begin about a longer-term American troop presence.

“I like to say that in Iraq, the only thing Americans know for certain, is that we know nothing for certain,” said Brett H. McGurk, a former [National Security Council](#) official in Iraq and current fellow at the [Council on Foreign Relations](#). “The exception is what's coming once there's a new government: they will ask to amend the Security Agreement and extend the 2011 date. We should take that request seriously. ”

The mission here in the desert, a temporary base of armored vehicles and one tent for two platoons, provided a vivid example of what American forces still do on the ground and, military officers said, would be able to do after the reduction.

“They needed someone killed, so they sent us,” said Maj. Bryan L. Logan, squadron operations officer for the Third Squadron, Seventh Cavalry Regiment, referring to an insurgent cell that

had been planting bombs near the highway.

Iraqi security forces were not present or informed of the mission, a seeming contravention of the emphasis from commanders that operations be conducted jointly, and at the request of the Iraqis. Lt. Col. Michael Jason, the brigade operations officer for the Third Infantry Division's Second Brigade, said that the operation was unusual because it didn't "have an Iraqi face."

The operation was justified by a liberal interpretation of the security agreement that allows unilateral operations to protect American forces, or, in Colonel Jason's words, to address "unique American problem sets."

"That's what they are doing," he said, referring to his soldiers.

For the troops living in the desert, it was a return to the soldiering life many hadn't experienced since earlier in the war or during training back home: eating Meals Ready to Eat, or M.R.E.'s; sleeping on top of vehicles or on the ground; firing artillery, albeit nonlethal, illuminated rounds to remind insurgents that Americans are still here.

The legacy of the United States' seven-year war here will partly pivot on how well the Iraqi police and army secure the country after the Americans are gone. American military officers praise the rising capability of the Iraqi security forces — especially in securing the country for the [parliamentary elections](#) in March. But [questions of loyalty](#) that arose during the sectarian warfare of 2006 and 2007 remain.

So as some soldiers in the desert hunted for insurgents, others felt they needed make sure that Iraqis at the checkpoint to Mosul were actually doing their jobs and stopping and searching vehicles. In Mosul, suicide attacks still regularly inflict damage.

The unit did not find the insurgents. But another unit close by found three of them laying a bomb. Days later, officers watched a video taken from the gunsight of an attack helicopter that killed the insurgents with a Hellfire missile.

In the closing window of the American war here, commanders are still trying to kill as many militants as possible, because they say it keeps American forces and Iraqis safer. But in doing so, the United States military command sometimes plays down the American role in the killing.

Almost daily, press releases are issued that announce the killing or capture of terrorists by the Iraqi security forces, usually noting the involvement of "U.S. advisers." Sometimes credit is not given when American soldiers kill militants.

In April, the third-ranking member of [Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia](#) was killed by Iraqi forces, according to a press release. But officers on the ground said he was killed by fire from an American Bradley Fighting Vehicle. And no press release has been issued about the three insurgents who were recently killed by the American Hellfire missile.

As the soldiers were packing up the desert camp, Major Logan, who saw combat in Iraq in 2003, stood watching and quoted [Robert Duvall](#) from a movie about another American war, Vietnam, one that ended badly: "Someday this war is going to end."