

Officials: Most troops out of Iraq in 18 months

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President Barack Obama plans to remove all U.S. combat troops from Iraq by August of next year, administration officials said Tuesday, ending the war that helped define his upstart presidential campaign — although a little more slowly than he promised.

The withdrawal plan — an announcement could come as early as this week — could help Obama turn his attention to another campaign pledge: Deploying more troops to Afghanistan, a region he calls the central front in the war on terrorism.

The timetable is a compromise. Removing so many people and tons of equipment presents logistical difficulties. Some commanders and advisers worry that security gains could backslide in Iraq if troops are brought out too soon, while others think the bulk of U.S. combat work is long since done.

“We are now carefully reviewing our policies in both wars, and I

will soon announce a way forward in Iraq that leaves Iraq to its people and responsibly ends this war,” Obama said in his address to Congress on Tuesday.

Obama built enormous grassroots support for his White House bid by pledging to withdraw troops from Iraq 16 months after taking office. That schedule, based on removing roughly one brigade a month, was predicated on commanders determining that it would not endanger U.S. troops left behind or Iraq’s fragile security.

Obama expects to leave a large contingent of troops in Iraq, between 30,000 and 50,000 troops, after August, 2010 to advise and train Iraqi security forces and to protect U.S. interests, according to two administration officials who spoke on condition of anonymity because the plan has not been made public. The contingent will include intelligence and surveillance specialists and their equipment, such as unmanned aircraft.

The withdrawal of American forces is set to be completed by December 2011, the period by which the U.S. agreed with Iraq

to remove all troops.

A senior White House official said Tuesday that Obama is at least a day away from making a final decision. An announcement on Wednesday was unlikely, he said, but added that Obama could discuss Iraq during a trip to North Carolina on Friday.

About 142,000 U.S. troops are in Iraq, roughly 14 brigades, about 11,000 more than the total in Iraq when President George W. Bush announced in January 2007 that he would “surge” the force to put down the insurgency. He sent an additional 21,000 combat troops to Baghdad and Anbar province.

Although the number of combat brigades has dropped from 20 to 14, the U.S. has increased the number of logistical and other support troops. A brigade is usually about 3,000 to 5,000 troops.

The White House considered at least two other options — one that followed Obama’s 16-month timeline and one that stretched withdrawal over 23 months, The Associated Press reported earlier this month.

Some U.S. commanders have spoken more optimistically in

recent months about prospects for reducing the force.

Marine Maj. Gen. John Kelly, who just left his job overseeing U.S. operations in Anbar Province, said Tuesday that he saw violence drop to an almost “meaningless” level over the past year.

Kelly told reporters Tuesday that in the area that was the home ground of the Sunni insurgency, American combat forces don’t have enough to do and most could have pulled out months ago.

“There is still a security issue there, but in the province I just left the (Iraqi) army and the police are more than handling the remnants of what used to be al-Qaida,” Kelly said. “There’s other parts of Iraq that aren’t going quite as well but all of Iraq is doing pretty well.”

According to officials, Obama had requested a range of options from his top military advisers, including one that would have withdrawn troops in 16 months. Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had recently forwarded withdrawal alternatives to the White House for Obama’s consideration.

In addition to the U.S. troops to be withdrawn, there is a sizable cadre of contractors who provide services to them who would pack their bags as well. There were 148,050 defense contractor personnel working in Iraq as of December, 39,262 of them U.S. citizens.

There are more than 200 U.S. military installations in Iraq. According to Army officials interviewed by the Government Accountability Office, it can take up to two months to shut down small outposts that hold up to 300 troops. Larger entrenched facilities, like Balad Air Base, could take up to 18 months to close, according to the GAO.

As of Monday, at least 4,250 members of the U.S. military had died in the Iraq war since it began in March 2003, according to an Associated Press count. More than 31,000 have been injured. An additional 35,841 have received medical air transport due to non-hostile incidents.

Congress has approved more than \$657 billion so far for the Iraq war, according to a report last year from the Congressional Research Service.

Turkish politician defies law with Kurdish speech

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The leader of Turkey’s Kurdish lawmakers startled the country Tuesday by addressing Parliament in his native language, breaking the law in a nation that has tried for decades to keep a firm grip on the restive minority amid fears of national division.

State-run television immediately cut off the live broadcast of legislator Ahmet Turk, ostensibly to celebrate UNESCO world languages week. But his real aim was to challenge the country’s policy toward its Kurdish population, a suppression of rights that only recently has started to ease.

“Kurds have long been oppressed because they did not know any other language,” Turk said. “I promised myself that I would speak in my mother tongue at an official meeting one day.”

Kurdish lawmakers gave Turk a standing ovation. His party has 21 legislators in the 550-seat

parliament.

Turkey’s prime minister himself spoke a few words in Kurdish at a campaign rally over the weekend. But fears of national division — supported by a war between the Turkish military and a Kurdish rebel group in the 1980s and 1990s — prevent any concerted effort to repeal the laws.

Turkey is caught between the long-held suspicion that outsiders and minorities can threaten state unity, and its moves toward the kind of Western-style democracy that would consider a language ban an affront to human rights.

Turkish law banned the speaking of Kurdish at all until 1991, and today it is barred in schools, parliament and other official settings on the grounds that it would divide the country along ethnic lines. Kurds, who are also present in large numbers in neighboring Iran, Iraq and Syria, make up about a fifth of Turkey’s more than 70 million people.

“The official language is Turkish,” Parliament Speaker Koksal Toptan said after Turk spoke. “This meeting should have

been conducted in Turkish.”

Private NTV television reported that prosecutors launched an investigation.

It was not clear whether he would face charges. As a lawmaker, he has immunity. In certain cases, a normal citizen speaking Kurdish in an official setting could go to jail.

But Tuesday’s incident could hurt Turk’s party, which is already accused by prosecutors of having ties to separatist Kurdish guerrillas.

Turkey’s power structure could be at odds over what course to take on the speech. The Islamic-oriented government has often sparred with secular circles backed by the judiciary and the military.

In a similar incident in 1991, a Kurdish lawmaker took the oath in parliament in Kurdish. Leyla Zana was later stripped of her immunity, prosecuted on charges of separatism and links to the rebels and served a decade in prison along with three other Kurdish legislators.

But heavy-handed action by the

state this time could backfire, exposing it to accusations of authoritarian behavior and further alienating Kurds ahead of local elections on March 29.

Turk’s speech was also a vote-getting stunt, as the elections will determine whether his Democratic Society Party can keep southeastern strongholds in the face of an aggressive campaign from the governing party.

Speaking in Kurdish, Turk described how he was jailed during a 1980 military coup and was beaten for speaking Kurdish to visiting relatives who knew no other language.

He also commented on the Kurdish spoken by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan during a campaign rally on Saturday in Diyarbakir, the main city in the mostly Kurdish southeast.

“When (Kurdish party) members salute someone in their own language, they are prosecuted or investigated. When a mayor speaks to his people in their own language, he is prosecuted,” Turk said. “But when the prime minister speaks Kurdish, nobody

says anything. We don’t think this is right. This is a two-faced approach.”

Erdogan had referred to Turkey’s first 24-hour Kurdish-language television, launched Jan. 1. At the rally, and on the day of the TRT6 channel’s inauguration, Erdogan said in Kurdish: “May TRT6 be beneficial.”

Some commentators said the prime minister had broken the law, but prosecutors did not launch a probe.

Erdogan’s efforts to court Kurdish support with economic aid and promises of more freedom has sapped some of the support for Turk’s party.

The European Union, for which Turkey is a candidate, has pushed the country for more Kurdish rights.

But the language issue has also come up in EU member Spain, where rules in the national parliament require lawmakers to speak Spanish. A few years ago, a Catalan nationalist spoke Catalan, and the speaker reprimanded him.

Such cases, however, are rare.