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It was one year ago today that the Obama administration officially announced it was pulling the last full U.S. combat brigade from Iraq. Today, roughly 46,000 U.S. troops remain in the country, along with more than 64,000 private contractors. This week, as Iraq suffers its deadliest violence of the year, there is increasing speculation that the Obama administration will extend its occupation of the war-ravaged nation. Earlier this month, the Iraqi government authorized talks on whether to approve keeping thousands of U.S. troops in Iraq beyond a withdrawal deadline of December 31. "All of the U.S. troops have [gone] back to their bases since 2009, and they have not been taking any daily patrols to [do] what they used to call 'protect Iraqis,'" says our guest, Raed Jarrar, an Iraqi-American blogger and political analyst based in Washington, D.C., who was in Iraq two weeks ago. "I think the U.S. presence in Iraq is not for protecting Iraqis. It has not been a part of the solution. And it's actually a part of the problem."

Guest: [Raed Jarrar](#), Iraqi-American blogger and political analyst based in Washington, D.C. He was in Iraq two weeks ago.

JUAN GONZALEZ: It was one year ago today that the Obama administration officially announced it was pulling the last full U.S. combat brigade from Iraq. Today, roughly 46,000 U.S. troops remain in the country, along with more than 64,000 contractors. This week, as Iraq suffers its deadliest violence of the year, there's increasing speculation that the Obama administration will extend its occupation of the war-ravaged nation.

Earlier this month, the Iraqi government authorized talks on whether to approve keeping thousands of U.S. troops in Iraq beyond a withdrawal deadline of December 31st. Top U.S. military chief, Admiral Mike Mullen, said any agreement to extend the U.S. occupation will require the Iraqi government to continue granting U.S. soldiers full immunity.

ADM. MIKE MULLEN: That kind of an agreement, which would include privileges and immunities for our American men and women in uniform, will need to go through the core. They also understand that time is quickly running out for us to be able to consider any other course. My government has made it clear that we would entertain a request for some troops to stay.

JUAN GONZALEZ: Earlier this week, the leading Iraqi Shiite cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr, made headlines after declaring there would be "war" if U.S. forces remain beyond the year-end withdrawal deadline. Despite officially ending combat operations, the U.S. military continues to carry out attacks inside Iraq. This week the U.S. acknowledged carrying out two air strikes against alleged Iraqi militants in June.

AMY GOODMAN: Iraqi government officials who support keeping U.S. troops have pointed to a recent spate of attacks as a reason to back a prolonged occupation. On Monday, Iraq suffered its deadliest day of the year with 89 people killed, more than 300 injured, in dozens of coordinated attacks across Iraq. The violence came just days after at least 56 people were killed in another series of attacks across the country.

To talk more about the violence and the prospect of an extended occupation, we're joined from Washington, D.C., by Raed Jarrar, an Iraqi-American blogger and political analyst, recently back from his country, from Iraq.

Raed, welcome to *Democracy Now!* Talk about the state of affairs in your country.

RAED JARRAR: This was a very hard trip for me. I haven't gone back to Baghdad since 2003. So it's the first time I go back to the city that I was born in. And it's the city that I finished my high school and undergraduation degree from.

It was very hard to go because of two reasons. The first one is that the city was destroyed. I couldn't recognize many of the neighborhoods because of the level of destruction. And I could not recognize many of the places because of the concrete walls that have been built around Baghdad. So when I drive around the neighborhood that I grew up in or the one that I went to school at, I couldn't tell where I was because of the concrete walls that were built, just blocking everything. You can't see where you are.

The second reason that made me feel really sad is that all of my family, my cousins and uncles, and all of my neighbors, all of my co-workers, colleagues, all of them have left the city. So I was a stranger in a city that I used to know hundreds of people in. So it was really hard for me to see

the real results of eight years of occupation and the real results of the displacement of five million Iraqis. Two-and-a-half million of them left the country, and the other two-and-a-half million were displaced internally.

The situation was extremely bad. Everything was bad. Services were really bad. There was no electricity while the temperature was more than 125 when I was there. Water supplies were not consistent. All government services were not working. Healthcare and education were dysfunctional. The political process is completely dysfunctional. Many of the important ministries have not been filled yet.

And unfortunately, these new talks to extend the U.S. military occupation are leading the country to more violence, because those who are against extending the occupation are attacking the U.S. troops and interests in Iraq, and those who are for extending the U.S. occupation are causing more violence to justify a longer occupation, because this has been the narrative all along, linking security to prolonging the U.S. occupation. So the more they can prove that Iraq is unstable, the more that they can guarantee that the U.S. would stay longer.

JUAN GONZALEZ: Let me ask you, in terms of this resurgence of violence, in the few reports that appear in the U.S. press here, it's depicted largely as a resurgence of sectarian violence. Your perspective on this? For instance, Margaret Warner of [PBS](#) recently spoke with the [Washington Post](#)'s Annie Gowen, who's reporting from Baghdad. And in the interview, Gowen said she spoke to Iraqis who were afraid that their country would descend into more sectarian violence if U.S. troops withdraw. This is a clip.

MARGARET WARNER: Have you heard anyone express fear that Iraq could see a return to the kind of sectarian violence that they had back in '06 and '07?

ANNIE GOWEN: Yes, actually, I spoke to just an Iraqi man today who said, you know, "We want the American troops to stay. You know, we are afraid that when they leave, the minute they leave, civil war will descend on the country again." And, you know, nobody wants to go—nobody here wants to go back to those days of the sectarian violence in '07, when, you know, you couldn't—the Iraqis couldn't even walk to work without seeing corpses in the street.

JUAN GONZALEZ: So, Raed Jarrar, is that your view, from what you saw, that the Iraqis are looking to the United States to save them from further sectarian violence?

RAED JARRAR: You know, I have rejected these arguments all along. In the last 20 years of conflict between the U.S. and Iraq, I have always rejected the argument that the U.S. is there to protect Iraqis from themselves and to protect Iraqis from other Iraqis. These arguments have expired years ago. I think it's—it doesn't make sense anymore to even use these arguments, because there are no U.S. troops patrolling Iraqi streets anymore. So I don't know how would that Iraqi man claim that the U.S. is protecting Iraq, saving Iraq from civil war that is awaiting around the corner, if we end our occupation and give Iraq back to the Iraqis. The U.S. has no tools to protect Iraqis from each other anymore, even if it wanted to. I don't think the intention is there, but even if the intention is there, there are no means to do that. All of my trip in Iraq, I have not seen a single U.S. patrol or tank going around streets. All of the U.S. troops have went back to their bases since 2009, and they have not been taking any daily patrols to, what they used to call, "protect Iraqis." So I think I completely reject this argument.

I think our presence, the U.S. presence, in Iraq is not for protecting Iraqis. It has not been a part of the solution. And it's actually a part of the problem. I think we have to understand, as Americans, that Iraqis view the U.S. as a foreign occupier. It is a part of why the Iraqi government lacks legitimacy. And it's a part of why the Iraqi armed forces lack legitimacy. So, to claim that our presence there, the U.S. presence, is for the sake of Iraqis is laughable. After eight years of occupation and 13 years of semi-daily attacks and economic sanctions, it's laughable for Iraqis to look at the U.S. as the savior. The U.S. is definitely a part of the problem. And a complete U.S. withdrawal is seen as a very important, and maybe the only, first step towards putting the country back on the right track of reconstruction and reconciliation.

AMY GOODMAN: Two things, Raed Jarrar. Can you talk about the significance or the role that Muqtada al-Sadr plays, and also the support that the current Iraqi government gives for Syria, this as the U.S. government has, after quite a long time of bloodshed in Syria, called for Assad to step down?

RAED JARRAR: Yeah, I think—let me start by talking about the Iraqi government's support to Syria. Some parts of the Iraqi governments are supporting the Syrian government, not because of political reasons, but unfortunately because of sectarian reasons. These are the same political parties, the ruling parties in Iraq, that saw Iraq through sectarian lenses. They see the region and the world through sectarian lenses, as well. For them, for al-Dawa party and the

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, the Supreme Council of Iraq, and other Shiite sectarian parties, they see the Syrian government as a Shiite government, and therefore, they want to protect it. It does not make any sense when you look at the regional dynamics and at what's happening now in Syria. It does not make sense that the current Iraqi government will be taking this stand. But unfortunately, as I said, the U.S.-installed government in Iraq only sees the world through these sectarian lenses, and that's why now they are sending money and funds and threatening to go to war with Syria if the Assad government collapses.

I think, to answer the second part of your question about Muqtada al-Sadr, everyone in the U.S. realizes that he has been a key player. I think the Sadrist movement, overall, is more on the nationalist side. They are nationalist Shiites in Iraq who refuse foreign interventions, in general. I think the last couple of years proved that the leadership of the movement is more open to collaborate with Iran than collaborate with other regional powers. But I think the masses are very critical to both Iran and the U.S., and they don't want either countries to interfere in Iraq.

The recent threats by al-Sadr to start attacking the U.S. again, these are extremely serious threats. We're talking about a movement of around five million Iraqis living in Baghdad and the south of the country. Many of them are armed. And many of them have started attacking the U.S. troops already. This week, al-Sadr movement attacked—they have launched eight military attacks against the U.S. forces in the last few days. And I think these are very concerning.

And I think the lack of political clarity, the lack of a clear political message from the president here, from President Obama, is causing all of this situation to deteriorate, because President Obama is allowing the Pentagon and the national security establishment in the U.S. to push back and to try to negotiate prolonging the occupation, try to link the U.S. withdrawal to security conditions on the ground, rather than keeping it as a deadline, a timeline. So all of this—the lack of leadership by President Obama is sending wrong messages to Iraqis, and it's pushing the discussion to the military attacks level. As I mentioned earlier, we have attacks against the U.S. We have attacks against Iraqis, that are not sectarian in nature, by the way. The attacks that happened on Monday, a wave of attacks that killed and injured hundreds of Iraqis, were not sectarian in nature—Sunnis and Shiites were targeted, because of political reasons, because of attempts to justify a longer U.S. presence. So I think many of these things can be solved by having a very clear political message by President Obama that we are indeed, the U.S. is going to withdraw the last U.S. soldier by the end of this year, that he is going to abide by his promises, and he's going to implement the binding security agreement with Iraq on time.

AMY GOODMAN: Raed Jarrar, thank you very much for being with us, Iraqi-American blogger,

political analyst, based in Washington, D.C., just returned from Iraq.