

## Iraq's Shias want referendum on US troop presence

Iraq's Shia leadership indicated Friday that it would press the Baghdad government for a national referendum on the issue of a further stationing of US forces in the country.

Imam Sadreddin al Kabandji said at the Friday prayers in the Shia holy city of Najaf: 'The Iraqi nation regards with concern the Iraqi-American treaty whose contents are not exactly known.'

The imam, an aide to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the supreme religious leader of Iraq's Shias, said that the draft of the long-term military and cooperation agreement which Baghdad is currently negotiating with Washington must finally be made public.

'The treaty must be presented to the people and the clergy,' he demanded. It was unacceptable that the government was negotiating 'behind closed doors' with the Americans, al-Kbandji added.

His comments came as an original deadline for the treaty to be ready for signing by the end of July was approaching. The treaty is to govern the conditions applying to those US forces remaining in Iraq after the current UN mandate expires at the end of the year.

But several issues remain unresolved, including the number of US army bases to remain in Iraq, immunity of American soldiers from prosecution, the operations of foreign security firms, and when US forces must request permission from the Baghdad government for a military operation.

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