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Subject: Early decision on US troops unlikely: Iraq official (AFP)

(AFP) - The chances of Iraqi leaders reaching an early decision on an extended US military presence beyond the end of this year are slim, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's media advisor told AFP on Sunday.

"I believe that political leaders will not reach an agreement during the two-week deadline" for US forces to stay beyond a scheduled pullout at the end of this year, said Ali Mussawi.

Iraqi leaders pledged on Saturday to decide within two weeks their position on a possible extension for US troops after a meeting at the presidential palace in Baghdad.

"All parties have discussed the matter, and we have all agreed that each one will... give its final response within two weeks," President Jalal Talabani said after the meeting with political blocs.

But Mussawi said leaders were too busy bickering over small issues, instead of focusing on more important matters such as the future of American forces in Iraq.

"Rather than discuss a topic of national importance, they are primarily concerned with the appointment of a minister, the dismissal of a deputy minister," Mussawi said.

"At Saturday's meeting, some (participants) put forward their partisan or religious stances, instead of national interest," he added.

About 46,000 US troops remain in Iraq, but the entire force is due to leave by the end of this year under a security agreement with Baghdad.

But top US officials have said that they would consider keeping on some troops after the deadline if requested by Iraqi authorities.

On Thursday, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, confirmed that the United States and Iraq are negotiating a possible new security deal that would keep US forces in the country beyond December 31.

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