

# Gates in Baghdad for talks with Iraqi officials

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BAGHDAD – On his first visit to Iraq this year, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates arrived Wednesday for two days of talks with senior government officials on the looming final withdrawal of American troops from a country still suffering from frequent insurgent violence eight years after the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime.

Gates' meetings Thursday were to include a session with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who has publicly insisted Iraq can handle its security without U.S. troops beyond 2011. The bulk of the remaining 47,000 U.S. troops are to begin going home in late summer or early fall, officials have said.

Gates has said in congressional testimony that it might be preferable to keep U.S. troops in the role of training Iraqi forces and providing security for an enlarging U.S. Embassy presence, but he also has said the U.S. will pull out completely on schedule at year's end unless the Iraqis request an extension.

In his talks Thursday, Gates is expected to tell al-Maliki that if he decides to invite U.S. forces to stay longer, he should do that "sooner, rather than later," a senior defense official traveling with Gates told reporters Wednesday. The official spoke on condition of anonymity in order to discuss Gates' thinking in advance of the private meeting.

The timing is important because an extended U.S. stay would require a reworking of a legal agreement, signed during the administration of George W. Bush, that requires all American military personnel to leave the country by Dec. 31, 2011.

Among other U.S. concerns are the slow pace at which al-Maliki has filled key government posts. The jobs of minister of defense and minister of the interior — the two primarily responsible for security — are still vacant.

Gates also was set to meet Thursday with U.S. troops and their commanders. On Friday he was scheduled to travel to northern Iraq.