US hearings on Iraq set course for intensified conflict

Peter Symonds
17 November 2006

Just over a week after American voters expressed their opposition to the war in Iraq, Senate Armed Services Committee hearings on Wednesday provided further confirmation that there will be no rapid withdrawal of troops or end to the US occupation.

A string of top generals and officials argued that any pull-out would be a disaster for US interests in Iraq and throughout the Middle East. The decision to convene the committee so rapidly after the election underscores the determination of Democrats and Republicans alike to shift the focus of public debate on Iraq. The hearings were staged quite consciously to undercut popular antiwar sentiment and to address instead what the Bush administration must do to shore up the US occupation.

In his testimony, General John Abizaid, the top US commander in the Middle East, bluntly opposed the call made by some Democrats in the course of the election campaign for "a phased withdrawal" of US forces from Iraq. He rejected the suggestion that there should be any timetable or constraints on troop numbers. Rather than reduced troop levels, Abizaid strongly hinted there would be an increase, ostensibly to provide more training for Iraqi security forces.

Abizaid made a definite appeal to the Democrats, whose chief criticisms of the Bush administration have been, not the invasion of Iraq, but the tactics used to carry it out. He pointedly endorsed the comments of retired General Eric Shinseki, who, in 2003, warned Congress that several hundred thousand US troops would be needed in Iraq, only to be publicly belittled by then Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. "I think you can look back and say that more American troops would have been advisable in the early stages," Abizaid said.

Rumsfeld's claims that a smaller US military force could seize and occupy Iraq have been discredited by the deepening disaster in Iraq, which has already claimed the lives of nearly 3,000 American soldiers. Abazaid's comments reflect the opinions of the Pentagon top brass that more troops should have been sent, and that a sustained occupation required a general expansion of the US military.

Indicating what is being prepared, Abizaid said the military faces the same problem today. "We can put in 20,000 more Americans tomorrow and achieve a temporary effect. But when you look at the overall American force pool that's available out there, the ability to sustain that commitment is simply not something that we have right now with the size of the Army and the Marine Corps," he said.

Abizaid's comments were supported by other officials, who painted a bleak picture of the crisis facing the US military in Iraq. Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) director, Lieutenant General Michael Maples cited the rising number of attacks on allied forces, which averaged 180 per day last month, up from 170 a day in September and 70 per day in January. He said sectarian violence was rising in "scope, complexity and lethality" and "creating an atmosphere of fear and hardening sectarianism, which is empowering militias and vigilante groups."

What was evident in the course of the hearing was the general consensus that US troops have to remain in Iraq, not to secure a better future for the Iraqi people, but to protect American economic and strategic interests in the Middle East. Senior State Department official David Satterfield told the committee that the US had to prevent Iraq crumbling. "Such an outcome in Iraq is unacceptable. It would undermine US national interests in Iraq and in the broader region," he warned.

While pointing to the disaster in Iraq, none of the Democrats seriously challenged Abizaid's insistence

that US troop numbers must not be reduced. The *New York Times* prominently featured the general's testimony, reflecting its own support and that of significant sections of the Democrats for the continued US occupation. In the same edition, the newspaper highlighted the remarks of various analysts in an article entitled, "Get out of Iraq now? Not so fast, experts say."

The "course correction" being discussed in ruling circles is not to rapidly withdraw troops, but the opposite. Retired general Anthony Zinni told the *New York Times* that any substantial troop reduction would likely accelerate the slide to civil war. "Instead of taking troops out, General Zinni said, it would make more sense to consider deploying additional American troops over the next six months to 'regain momentum' as part of a broader effort to stabilise Iraq."

The bipartisan top-level Iraq Study Group co-chaired by James Baker and Lee Hamilton is yet to formally hand down its recommendations, but there are strong indications that the proposals being hammered out involve a bolstering of troops numbers and a bloody crackdown on anti-US opposition in Iraq.

Citing senior American officials, the British *Guardian* reported yesterday that President Bush had told senior advisers that the US must make "a last big push" to win the war. According to the newspaper, "Bush's refusal to give ground, coming in the teeth of growing calls in the US and Britain for a radical rethink or a swift exit, is having a decisive impact on the [Iraq Study Group's] policy review."

The *Guardian* outlined the four points of a "victory strategy" being circulated among senior US officials. These include an increase in the number of US troops in Iraq by as many as 20,000, enlisting the assistance of neighbouring states including possibly Iran and Syria, and the establishment of an autocratic regime in Baghdad. A former administration official told the newspaper: "What they're going to say is: lower the goals, forget about the democracy crap, put more resources in, do it."

Not coincidentally, the figure of 20,000 troops happens to match the number floated by General Abizaid in the congressional hearings. The purpose of these extra personnel was also hinted in his testimony. While nominally allocated for "training", the Pentagon is planning to insert US advisers into the Iraqi army at all levels, including in relatively small units with less than 200 soldiers. The plan is to make them "more capable in their ability to confront the sectarian problem".

In reality what is being proposed are measures to bring Iraqi security forces, which currently have various conflicting sectarian loyalties, firmly under US control. Such a step is a necessary precursor to demanding that the Iraqi government headed by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki crack down on Shiite militias loyal to parties in his ruling coalition, in particular the Mahdi army of Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. There have been repeated hints in Washington and Baghdad that if Maliki refuses, he faces the prospect of being removed.

In his congressional testimony, General Abizaid emphasised that Maliki had to deal with the Shiite militias "very soon". "We have to make sure that the Iraqi army is the paramount force in the country to defend the country so people won't turn to the militia for support. What would make me very pessimistic is if the Iraqi government fails to disarm the illegal militias."

This is the bipartisan agenda being hammered out in Washington. Far from ending the war, it involves a military build up and a confrontation with the Shiite militias that will inevitably produce a bloodbath for the Iraqi people and a further descent into the quagmire for US soldiers.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact