

Bush administration preparing to boost US troop strength in Iraq

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During the past week, the Bush administration has given clear signs that it is preparing to increase the number of US troops in Iraq, as part of a bloody offensive against the Iraqi resistance. Such a move would be taken in direct opposition to the overwhelming and growing popular sentiment in the US against the Iraq war.

The political establishment, while uniformly supportive of continuing the Iraq occupation, is deeply divided over what actions are required to extricate itself from the current military and political debacle. The Iraq Study Group report, released last week, expressed the widespread view within US ruling circles that salvaging Washington's position in Iraq and throughout the Middle East requires negotiations with Iran and Syria, together with a plan to reduce the presence of American combat troops in Iraq by 2008.

Political initiative in Washington, however, has clearly shifted to those who are advocating a significant increase of US troops, accompanied by a violent assault on the Iraqi population.

The drive toward increasing the number of occupation forces was highlighted by an article in the *Los Angeles Times* on Wednesday ("Pentagon's Plan: More US Troops in Iraq," by Julian Barnes). The *Times* reported that within the military there is "strong support" for a plan to "double down" in Iraq, which would include "a substantial buildup in American troops, an increase in industrial aid and a major combat offensive against Muqtada Sadr," the leader of a Shia militia associated with opposition to the American occupation.

On Thursday, Senator John McCain reiterated his calls for bolstering the occupation forces with 15,000 to 30,000 more troops. McCain made his remarks in Baghdad during a visit with several other Congressmen, including Democratic Senator Joseph Lieberman, who has supported McCain's position.

According to the *Times*, the proposals being floated in the Pentagon also include a plan for permanently increasing the size of the US Army and Marine Corps. One of the main hurdles the military has faced to increasing the size of the

occupation forces is that the military is already severely strained. A planned increase in the military's overall permanent troop strength, a move that has been long advocated by the Democratic Party leadership, would be intended to address this problem.

"Military officials are taking a close look at a proposal advanced by Frederick W. Kagan, a former West Point Military Academy historian, to combine a surge with a quick buildup of the Marines and the Army," the *Times* reported.

An article in the *Washington Post* on Wednesday ("Army, Marine Corps To Ask for More Troops" by Scott Tyson) confirmed that the Army and Marine Corps are preparing to ask incoming Defense Secretary Robert Gates to support permanent increases in personnel by several thousand troops, along with fewer restriction on the use of reserve troops.

The article in the *Times* was clearly the product of deliberate leaks orchestrated by the White House as part of its push for a new military assault in Iraq. John King, chief national correspondent for CNN, reported in an interview on CNN's "Situation Room" Tuesday that, according to senior administration officials and others involved in White House negotiations, "the president is planning to do something big." Citing one of the sources he spoke with, Bush "is very seriously considering . . . increasing US troop levels in the short term and also resisting the recommendations of the Iraq Survey Group."

As the WSWWS noted prior to the elections, there have long been plans in place to increase US troop levels in Iraq to launch an offensive against the Shiite militias, particularly that led by Sadr. (See "*New York Times* 'military analysis' foreshadows US bloodbath in Baghdad"). The November elections, which expressed the enormous popular opposition to the war, have not altered these plans.

The administration this week engaged in a stage-managed "listening tour" to build support for its positions. On Wednesday, Bush met with senior Pentagon officials to discuss Iraq strategy. Following the meeting, in bellicose remarks made while surrounded by top military generals

along with Vice President Dick Cheney, Bush declared, “I’ve heard some ideas that would lead to defeat, and I reject those ideas—ideas such as leaving before the job is done.” This was intended as a clear rejection of any talk of a timeline for the drawdown of US troops.

Earlier in the week, Bush met with a panel of three retired generals and two academics, which was also intended to sideline any talk of a date for reducing the US presence in Iraq. According to the *Washington Post*, all of those involved disagreed with the Iraq Study Group’s call to reduce the number of US combat troops in Iraq by 2008 and engage in negotiations with Iran and Syria. The group included Generals John Keane, Barry McCaffrey and Wayne Downing, along with academics Eliot Cohen and Stephen Biddle.

This week, the administration announced that it was postponing a major speech by the president from before Christmas to sometime early next year. The decision reflects in part a desire to prepare public opinion for an increase in the number of US troops in Iraq.

However, the delay is also symptomatic of the deep internal conflicts within the ruling establishment, and even within the Bush administration itself, over the direction of US policy. In particular, it is not clear what position the incoming Defense Secretary Robert Gates will take. Gates was formerly a member of the Iraq Study Group, and has advocated negotiations with Iran in the past.

Within the military, there are also serious divisions. According to a *Washington Post* article on Thursday “Joint Chiefs Advise Change in War Strategy” by Robin Wright and Ann Scott Tyson, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff George Casey is supporting a plan that would remove US combat troops from Iraqi cities and place greater reliance on American military “advisors” building up the Iraqi military. This plan is in general agreement with the orientation of the Iraq Study Group, though the *Post* also noted, “Casey is still considering whether to request more troops, possibly as part of an expanded training mission to strengthen the Iraqi army.”

The concern within these layers, also expressed in earlier comments by General John Abizaid, commander of US forces in the Middle East, is that an increase in US presence in Iraq will not only place greater strains on the US military, but also serve to further inflame opposition in Iraq, the entire Middle East, and in the United States itself.

Part of the plan supported by Casey, which was reportedly developed by Lt. Gen. Peter Chiarelli, the outgoing US ground commander in Iraq, would involve placing greater emphasis on bringing the Sunni elite into the Iraqi government by guaranteeing them a share of Iraqi oil revenue and reversing the previous policy of “de-

Baathification.” This conflicts with the so-called “80 percent” solution, which calls for relying entirely on the Shia and Kurdish elite—and effectively aiding them in a civil war against the Sunni population—after sidelining Sadr. According to some earlier reports, this latter proposal is supported by Vice President Cheney.

As these issues and others are worked out in Washington, it has become clear that the one option that has been completely removed from the framework of the debate is that which is supported by a growing majority of Americans—an end to the war. Polls conducted within the past week show enormous antiwar sentiment, with a significant increase even since the November elections.

A CBS poll found that approval of Bush’s handling of the Iraq war stands at a record low of 21 percent. A *Washington Post*-ABC News poll found that 79 percent favor shifting US troops away from combat operations, while 69 percent support withdrawing most combat forces by 2008. A USA Today poll found that 55 percent of the population wants most US troops withdrawn within a year, but only 18 percent think that this will actually happen. These figures in fact underestimate popular opposition, since the questions are posed in the politically circumscribed language of the official debate in Washington and the media.

In spite of this public opposition to the war—and the stunning defeat it suffered in the midterm election—the Bush administration feels emboldened to go on the offensive and push for an expansion of military violence in Iraq. This reflects the fact that the views of the population find no genuine expression in Washington. Though they are bitterly divided over tactics, all sides of the debate accept the legitimacy of the occupation, oppose a rapid withdrawal of US forces, and support the attempt to impose American hegemony over the Middle East.

The Democratic Party, having won control of Congress primarily due to public opposition to the war, has already ruled out any cut off of funding for military operations in Iraq, and has also rejected any talk of impeachment. The spinelessness of the official opposition in Washington has once again handed over political initiative to the most right-wing militarist factions of the American ruling elite.



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