

Democratic presidential candidates: US troops could stay in Iraq until 2013

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The Democratic Party's pretense of opposing the war in Iraq has largely collapsed following a series of defeats in the US Senate last week of Democratic-sponsored legislation proposing timetables for partial "redeployment" of the more than 160,000 troops currently occupying the country.

Nothing could make clearer the real position of the party, however, than the Democratic debate Wednesday night in New Hampshire, in which all three of the party's leading presidential candidates—Senators Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama and former Senator John Edwards—refused to commit themselves, if elected, to withdrawing all American troops from Iraq by the beginning of their second term—in 2013.

"I think it's hard to project four years from now," said Obama. He added that he intended to leave only those troops needed "to protect US bases and US civilians and engage in counterterrorism operations in Iraq."

"It is very difficult to know what we're going to be inheriting," Clinton replied. Last Sunday, appearing on the CBS News program "Meet the Press," the Democratic frontrunner allowed that "there will be remaining missions" in Iraq after the 2008 election, including counterterrorism, protecting the embassy and US civilians, training Iraqi puppet forces and overseeing the Kurdish region.

Asked if it would take the 100,000 US troops the Bush administration foresees remaining in Iraq in 2009 to sustain such missions, Clinton replied, "I don't believe it will," but added that the answer was "hypothetical."

"I cannot make that commitment," said former Senator John Edwards of North Carolina in reply to the same question. "We will have an embassy in Iraq, and that embassy has to be protected," he added. He further insisted that all of the Democratic candidates wanted to take "a responsible position" in relation to Iraq.

The obvious question is: responsible to whom? It is certainly not to the American people, who support the withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq and not the continuation of the war for another five years or more. It is not to the voters who went to the polls last November and

handed the leadership of the House and Senate to the Democrats in an attempt to compel such a withdrawal. Nor is it to the American troops who, despite the shilling for the administration by political generals like David Petraeus, want out of this dirty war.

The responsibility felt by the frontrunners for the Democratic presidential nomination is to the US financial elite which dominates their campaigns and whose interests are inextricably bound up with the utilization of US military might to seize the vast energy resources of the Persian Gulf and secure a strategic advantage over American capitalism's principal rivals in Europe and Asia.

Given the present casualty rates, keeping US troops deployed in Iraq for another five years could mean as many as 50,000 more killed or wounded, as well as untold hundreds of thousands more Iraqi dead.

The claim by all the leading candidates that a substantial US military force will be required in Iraq indefinitely to protect the US embassy is particularly telling. This American-built fortress, occupying a 65-acre compound, is by far the biggest embassy on the planet and is built to accommodate a staff of over 1,100.

What is being prepared in this massive structure is not a diplomatic mission, but a colonial-style administration that is meant to continue wielding the real power in Iraq. For such a project, large numbers of American troops would indeed be needed for many years and even decades to come.

The position expressed by the Democratic frontrunners in the debate dovetailed neatly with that put forward by the Bush administration's defense secretary, Robert Gates, in testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Wednesday. Gates came to Capitol Hill to demand an additional \$42 billion in war funding—bringing the total for the current fiscal year to nearly \$190 billion.

He told the Senate panel that he foresees a "long-term presence" in Iraq involving a "very modest" number of US troops. He said this would probably consist of five combat brigades, amounting to roughly 20,000 troops. Together with support units, this would leave more than 40,000 American

soldiers and Marines occupying the country for many years to come.

The funding request is a 15 percent increase over last year and would bring the total amount spent on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan through a succession of “emergency” funding bills to over \$800 billion.

Meanwhile, the Senate Wednesday managed to pass by a wide majority a pair of amendments to the Pentagon appropriations bill now before Congress that provide significant insight into the political consensus that is emerging over the ongoing occupation in Iraq and the growing threat of war against Iran.

The first measure, an amendment sponsored by Democratic presidential candidate Senator Joseph Biden, who chairs the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, proposes a Balkans-style breakup of Iraq into three sectarian-based territories—Kurdish in the North, Shia in the South and Sunni in the western and central regions.

The bipartisan support for this proposal is a measure of the increasing desperation within US ruling circles over the deepening debacle in Iraq and the impotence of the central government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, as well as the criminal indifference of both parties to the fate of the Iraqi people.

Such an ethno-religious partition would spell a bloodbath that would eclipse the carnage that is already wracking the country.

It is already estimated that as many 50,000 Iraqis are being driven from their homes every week as a result of ethnic cleansing campaigns. The Biden proposal would provide legal sanction and direct US support for this exercise in sectarian violence. In a country where, before the invasion, fully one third of Iraqi marriages were between Sunni and Shia, such a sectarian breakup would mean brutal suffering for millions.

Cities like Kirkuk and other areas with mixed populations would ignite as a result of such a division, provoking the kind of carnage that was caused by the British-engineered partition of India and Pakistan 60 years ago, which claimed millions of lives.

The proposal—like virtually all of the Democratic legislation—is aimed not at ending the US occupation of Iraq, but creating conditions in which it can continue, in this case by a policy of divide and rule to help stamp out national resistance.

The second resolution, sponsored by the so-called “independent Democrat,” Senator Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, was titled “Sense of the Senate on Iran.”

While nonbinding, this resolution essentially provides the Bush administration with both Senate support and a casus bellifor a war of aggression against Iran. The White House

could conceivably invoke the measure as proof of Senate approval for yet another, and far more catastrophic, military adventure.

The resolution cites a series of unsubstantiated administration claims that Iran is responsible for training and arming Iraqi militias for attacks on US occupation forces in Iraq. It concludes that “it should be the policy of the United States to combat, contain, and roll back the violent activities and destabilizing influence inside Iraq of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran.”

It further advocates “the prudent and calibrated use of all instruments of United States national power in Iraq, including diplomatic, economic, intelligence, and military instruments” to achieve this goal.

Finally it calls upon the Bush administration to “designate the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps as a foreign terrorist organization.” Such an action, declaring a sovereign state’s largest security agency a “terrorist” entity, has no precedent in international relations or law. Moreover, defining the alleged crime of supporting resistance by people of an occupied country against a foreign occupier as “terrorism” underscores the fact that for Washington the term means nothing more than opposing US interests.

The unmistakable logic of such a designation would be an eventual war against Iran.

The measure targeting Iran passed by a vote of 76 to 22, while the amendment advocating the partition of Iraq was approved by 75 to 23. On both of these resolutions, Democratic frontrunner Clinton voted in favor, while her closest rival, Obama, failed to cast a vote.

The Democratic candidates’ debate and the votes in the US Senate make clear that no section of the political establishment intends to end the war or renounce the original predatory and imperialist aims that underlay it. On the contrary, as American working people, the vast majority of the population, are turning increasingly against the war and moving to the left, the ruling elite and both its major parties are moving sharply to the right.

More than a year before the 2008 presidential elections, a bipartisan consensus is emerging not only for the continued occupation of Iraq for many years to come, but for the buildup to a new war against Iran that has the potential of unleashing violence and bloodshed on a far greater scale.



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