

US congressional hearings reveal consensus that Iraq war will continue

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The back-to-back hearings on the US military surge in Iraq held by the Senate Foreign Relations and Armed Services committees on Tuesday—following a similar session in the House of Representatives the day before—served to underscore the growing consensus within the American political establishment that the military occupation will continue indefinitely.

The testimony by the US senior commander in Iraq, Gen. David Petraeus, and the American ambassador in Baghdad, Ryan Crocker, had been anticipated by leaders of both major parties as well as by the media as some kind of turning point in the four-and-a-half-year US military adventure in Iraq. It has proven to be nothing of the sort.

For months, the Bush administration has insisted that no debate, must less change, in Iraq policy could be undertaken in advance of the Petraeus-Crocker report to Congress. The report itself, which was supposedly linked to a series of political, economic and security “benchmarks” measuring the progress of the Iraqi regime, was mandated by the Democratic congressional leadership at the end of May as a condition attached to its voting funds to continue the war and pay for the surge.

Despite their dubious claims of military progress and presentation of rigged figures showing a reduction in violence, both Petraeus and Crocker openly acknowledged that the benchmarks relating to political stabilization and—all-important for US interests—the passage of a new oil law opening up Iraqi reserves to foreign exploitation have gone by the wayside.

“There is an enormous amount of dysfunctionality in Iraq; that is beyond question,” Crocker acknowledged under questioning before the Foreign Affairs panel. “The government in many respects is dysfunctional, and members of the government know it.”

Neither the general nor the diplomat would give any answer to repeated questions as to how long they believed substantial US forces would remain in Iraq. “Neither of us believe we can see beyond next summer,” Crocker declared. Pressed for an answer, Crocker acknowledged that it would be “well beyond the end of next summer” before a stable and sustainable Iraqi regime could be put in place.

The thrust of their testimony was that the current military surge must continue as long as possible, and that the occupation will continue at its previous level of 130,000 troops into the foreseeable future.

Petraeus put forward a tentative proposal that some 7,500 troops

be withdrawn by December and that the rest of the approximately 30,000 sent into the country as part of the buildup that began last February be withdrawn by next spring.

Under questioning, he acknowledged that such a return to the previously existing level of deployment was made virtually inevitable by the fact that the military will run out of fresh units to send to Iraq by that time. Troop strength could be maintained only by extending tours of duty in Iraq beyond the already elevated 15 months or calling up more National Guard or reserve units. The Pentagon’s uniformed leadership has opposed both because of fear that they would substantially escalate the military’s personnel crisis.

In the Senate, as in the House, lawmakers, both Democrats and Republicans, treated the testimony of Petraeus with deference bordering on obsequiousness. One after another thanked him for leading the brutal occupation in Iraq.

One Republican member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Johnny Isakson, a first-term senator from Georgia, went so far as to cite a recent poll showing that over 60 percent of the population, asked which agency inspired greater confidence in its handling of the war—the president, Congress or the military—chose the military, while barely 20 percent chose the Congress. This, he said, showed that Congress had no business questioning Petraeus’s policy.

Connecticut Senator Joseph Lieberman—who calls himself an “independent Democrat” after losing the Democratic primary in 2006 because of his pro-war policy, but winning the general election—went even further, suggesting that he and his colleagues should “cheer” Petraeus’s proposals and then “look forward to the next report in the spring.”

One senator—a Republican rather than a Democrat—departed from scripted identification of support for Petraeus with “support for the troops.”

Senator Chuck Hagel of Nebraska, a long-time Republican critic of the Bush administration’s war policy who recently announced he would not seek reelection, drew attention to a *New York Times* op-ed piece written last month by seven non-commissioned officers of the 82nd Airborne Division, who were completing 15-month deployments.

“To believe that Americans, with an occupying force that long ago outlived its reluctant welcome, can win over a recalcitrant local population and win this counterinsurgency is far-fetched,” they wrote, citing continued unrest and the questionable loyalty of the US-trained and armed Iraqi security forces.

For the Iraqis, they concluded, the invasion, had “robbed them of their self-respect. They will soon realize that the best way to regain dignity is to call us what we are—an army of occupation—and force our withdrawal.”

“Are we going to dismiss those seven NCOs? Are they ignorant?” Hagel demanded of Petraeus. “They laid out a pretty different scenario, general, ambassador, from what you’re laying out today.”

Hagel, a Vietnam veteran, continued: “I’ve always found that you want an honest evaluation, and not through charts, not through the White House evaluations. You ask a sergeant or a corporal what they think. I’ll bet on them every time, as I know you will. General, I know you will.”

The exchange called attention to the otherwise unstated contradiction between the perspective promoted by Petraeus and the sentiment among broad layers of the military, which reflects that of the population as a whole. Petraeus was handpicked by the White House—and then unanimously approved by the Democratic-led Senate—precisely because he was willing to implement a policy of military escalation that other commanders opposed as unviable. The deference shown by Congress notwithstanding, within the ranks of the military he is widely seen as political general tied to the White House.

For the most part, members of both houses of Congress passed over in silence the issue that the seven NCOs stressed—the sentiments of the Iraqi people themselves.

A poll released this week by ABC News, the BBC and the Japanese broadcast network NHK provided one of the most thorough examinations of the views of average Iraqis, pointing to mounting hostility to the occupation as well as towards the US-backed regime of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

Based on interviews with 2,112 Iraqis in 450 neighborhoods spread over all 18 Iraqi provinces between August 17 and 24, the poll found that the share of Iraqis opposing the presence of US and other troops in their country had risen to 79 percent.

The poll also showed 57 percent of all Iraqis—and a staggering 93 percent of Sunnis—supporting armed attacks on US occupation forces.

As for the impact of the surge, 70 percent of those polled believed that security had become worse in the areas where the additional American forces had been deployed, while 11 percent said it was unchanged.

On questions relating to basic conditions of life, the results were much the same. In terms of access to electricity, 93 percent said conditions were very bad or quite bad. In relation to availability of jobs, the figure was 80 percent, and clean water, 75 percent. Also, 75 percent said that reconstruction efforts in their areas had been either quite ineffective, very ineffective or nonexistent.

There could be not be a more damning indictment of the criminal nature of the US war and occupation, nor a more telling refutation of the spurious claims of “progress” made by Petraeus and Crocker.

Yet the interests and desires of the Iraqi people are utterly excluded from the phony debate on Capitol Hill. What drives this debate are the strategic interests of US imperialism in the Persian Gulf and internationally.

To the extent that divisions have emerged, they are fundamentally over what are the most appropriate tactics for furthering these interests and the aims that drove the war from the outset—establishing US hegemony over the oil-rich Persian Gulf and thereby securing a strategic advantage over Washington’s real and potential rivals.

If the reaction to the long-awaited report of Petraeus and Crocker has spelled any “turning point,” it is a further muting of the official debate over the war. From the outset, the Democratic congressional leadership has made it clear that, behind its antiwar posturing, it had no intention of pressing for a complete withdrawal of American forces from Iraq.

Repeatedly, leading Democrats acknowledged that their proposals would leave tens of thousands of US troops in the country for the purposes of training Iraqi puppet forces, carrying out “counter-insurgency operations” and guarding US strategic assets, which would inevitably include the guarding of eventual American oil installations.

This basic outlook was reiterated Tuesday, with Senator Carl Levin, the Democratic chairman of the Armed Services Committee, expressing his support for a timetable not for withdrawal, but for a “transition of our forces from a mainly combat role to a mainly support role.” He added, “America’s presence in Iraq needs to be significantly reduced.”

The reaction to the report by Petraeus and Crocker makes clear that the Democrats will accept the continued large-scale deployment of American occupation troops indefinitely. Already, in both houses of Congress, legislation is being prepared that would drop any reference to withdrawal deadlines, merely seeking an end to the surge and a plan from the White House for an eventual drawdown of forces.

In the end, such proposals are barely distinguishable from the plan put forward by Petraeus himself. At the same time, the Democrats are preparing to vote for yet another \$200 billion in war funding.

What has emerged most clearly through the past several months of official debate in Washington over the Iraq war is the political role of the Democratic Party itself. Having won control of Congress thanks to overwhelming popular hostility to Bush and the Republicans over the war, it has postured as the voice of this popular discontent, while all the while pursuing a policy of supporting the war’s continuation. Since the November election, the Democrats’ actions have served primarily to divert and contain popular opposition to the war, while lending Bush’s policy a mantle of legitimacy by making it appear that there exists no realistic alternative.

Such an alternative can emerge only from outside the political establishment and both major parties in the form of an independent political movement of working people against war and the political parties and social interests that support it.



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