

US Defense Secretary sides with military opposition to troop drawdown in Iraq

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US Defense Secretary Robert Gates solidarised himself on Monday with the demands of top-ranking US officers in Iraq to freeze the occupation force at 15 combat brigades, or some 130,000 troops, when the “surge” comes to an end in July. After a meeting in Baghdad with US commander General David Petraeus, Gates told journalists that a pause in any further reductions “probably does make sense”.

The five additional combat brigades deployed last year to boost the US presence in Iraq to 160,000 troops will have left the country by July and are not being replaced by fresh forces. Gates had repeatedly suggested since last September that the “drawdown” could continue at the same pace in the latter half of the year, reducing the overall occupation strength to around 100,000 troops by the beginning of 2009 and the inauguration of a new president.

He was reflecting the views of a significant faction within the US military that is alarmed over the long-term impact of constant deployments to Iraq on the morale and cohesion of the volunteer armed forces. Some army brigades and marine units have served three or more tours of duty in either Iraq or Afghanistan over the past seven years. To provide the necessary forces for the surge, deployments for army brigades had to be extended from 12 months to 15 months. Stress is leading many officers and experienced soldiers to resign from the military.

Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Admiral Michael Mullen bluntly told a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on February 6 that while he did not believe the armed forces had been “broken” by the constant deployments, the danger existed. “We are focused on this very heavily in literally every decision we review,” he said. In Iraq, he was in favour of withdrawing troops “sooner rather than later ... People are tired.”

General Petraeus has made no secret of his disagreements with the Pentagon chiefs and any further

drawdown. In January, he told CNN: “We will ... need to have some time to let things settle a bit, if you will, after we complete the withdrawal [of the 30,000 surge troops].... We think it would be prudent to do some period of assessment, then to make decisions.” His second-in-command, General Raymond Odierno, has echoed his view.

Senior officers in Iraq have at times suggested that any withdrawal would be tantamount to a betrayal of the thousands of US troops who have been killed and wounded. The primary concern of Petraeus, however, is not sentimentality over fallen comrades. It is the utter failure of the US occupation to establish any viable political arrangements in Iraq that permit a substantial reduction in troop numbers.

The ebb in fighting in western Iraq and Baghdad during 2007 was not the result of a decisive military victory over the anti-occupation insurgency or the development of a strong pro-US regime, but rather a desperate policy of buying off substantial sections of the resistance. In the process, an entirely new set of dilemmas has been created.

In Anbar province, Petraeus has presided over the recruitment of Sunni tribal chieftains and supporters of the former Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein, who were losing a power struggle with Islamist-based insurgent groupings. They have assisted the US military to crush their fundamentalist rivals. In return, however, they are demanding power and privileges for a layer of the Sunni elite that rejects the legitimacy of the Shiite and Kurdish-dominated Iraqi government.

The US military in effect provides the Sunni groups with protection from Washington’s Baghdad puppet regime in exchange for ending attacks on American forces. The policy has been extended to the capital and other cities through the formation of armed Sunni militias out of the former insurgent organisations who were being defeated in a vicious civil war with the Shiite-dominated

Iraqi security forces and the Mahdi Army of cleric Moqtada al-Sadr.

In the Sunni areas of Diyala, Salah Ad Din and Ninevah provinces where Petraeus has not succeeded in buying off the insurgency, bitter fighting is still taking place. A US offensive is currently underway to dislodge hundreds of anti-occupation guerillas from Mosul, the country's second largest city.

About 190 "Awakening Councils" and "Sons of Iraq" militias, with close to 80,000 mainly Sunni fighters, are now on the US payroll. The Iraqi government, which fears the groups will ultimately seek to overthrow Shiite dominance, is refusing to incorporate any more than 20 percent of them into the military or police and is demanding the right of its security forces to enter the Sunni-controlled districts.

An outbreak of savage conflict is only being prevented by the positioning of US troops along the fault-lines of the sectarian divide in Baghdad. The standoff is inevitably generating tremendous resentments among both the Sunni and Shiite elite.

In the working class Shiite suburbs of Baghdad, the US military has essentially ceded control to the Sadrist movement in exchange for an end to its operations against Sunni opponents and its assistance in hunting down Shiite insurgents who attack the occupation forces. The US sponsorship of large Sunni-Baathist militias, however, has produced open opposition to Sadr's collaboration. Factions of the Mahdi Army have called in recent weeks for an end to the ceasefire. Sadr has refused, making it likely that there will be substantial break-aways from his 60,000-strong militia and the emergence of new Shiite resistance groups.

For their part, the Sunni militias are becoming increasingly frustrated by their continued marginalisation from political power. They are coming under constant attack by groups who oppose their collaboration, and have clashed with government or US forces several times over the past month. Last week, in Diyala province, the Awakening Council announced it was suspending all cooperation with the occupation following the murder of two girls, allegedly by Shiite police.

In Anbar, the US military faces the prospect of an even greater collapse of its deals. This week, the 20,000-strong tribal Awakening Council militia issued a threat to use armed force to seize control of the provincial government. The divided and dysfunctional Iraqi parliament has not been able to agree on a date for new provincial elections, leaving the Anbar government in the hands of the Sunni

Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP). The IIP is one of the few Sunni parties that agreed in 2003 to collaborate with the occupation. It is hated among the tribal forces, which lost thousands of fighters in the bloody battles for Fallujah and Ramadi in 2004.

A host of other flashpoints are looming. In particular, tensions are mounting between Kurdish factions and rival Sunni, Shiite and Turkomen groups in the volatile city of Kirkuk and an intra-Shiite civil war is possible in the oil-rich city of Basra.

When Gates met with Petraeus in Baghdad this week, he would have been told that the consensus among his commanders is that 130,000 troops are the bare minimum needed to continue the subjugation of Iraq this year.

The concerns of the officer caste were articulated in the *US Army Times* editorial of February 11. The military newspaper opined:

"Talk that the drawdown of forces could continue beyond that [the five surge brigades], pushed by Army leaders in Washington, understandably has many field commanders concerned that the leaders would draw down forces in Iraq too quickly, paving the way for a potential resurgence of the insurgency. The increased number of attacks in the past few weeks north of Baghdad and in Mosul adds credence to that concern....

"It will take time to determine if 15 BCTs [brigade combat teams] can continue the progress, and whether a further drawdown is practicable.... If not, the timing will be such that the next president will get a choice: another surge or an exit strategy."

Gates's endorsement of this standpoint provides a clear signal that the Bush administration will accept a recommendation by Petraeus in April that at least 15 brigades stay in Iraq until the beginning of a new presidency. At that time, regardless of whether it is a Democrat or Republican in the White House, they will face the reality that US domination over Iraq means the indefinite deployment of a large part of the US military's available ground forces to suppress the opposition of the Iraqi people.



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