

US military announces 10,000 more post-“surge” troops in Iraq

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On Monday, the US military announced that the number of troops in Iraq following the “surge” begun last year will be some 10,000 more than pre-surge levels. What was originally presented as a temporary increase of US occupation forces will result in the indefinite presence of 140,000 US soldiers in Iraq.

Pentagon Joint Chiefs of Staff operations director Carter Ham told reporters during a press conference that by July of 2008, the total standing occupation force would be reduced to 15 brigades from 20 brigades at the height of the surge, still leaving 8,000 of the 30,000 additional forces introduced under the surge.

Ham refused to give an estimate of troop levels by the end of Bush’s presidential term, calling it “premature” to talk of future reductions. “This will be very much conditions-based,” he said.

Ham’s remarks came two weeks after US Defense Secretary Robert Gates said a “pause” in the drawdown of US forces “probably does make sense.”

Ham said that many of the additional troops are needed for guarding the extensive “detention operations” the US maintains in Iraq, an allusion to the tens of thousands of additional Iraqis who have been imprisoned by the US in the course of the surge.

The increased number of US troops has been used to carry out massive aerial bombardments and the violent repression of resistance to the US colonial-style occupation. Sectarian violence has been diminished through deals made between the US military and sections of the Sunni and Shiite elite, together with a process of ethnic cleansing, overseen by the US military, that has transformed large sections of the country into exclusive Shiite and Sunni zones.

The continued crisis of the Iraq occupation has exacerbated tensions within the US ruling elite and among the military brass.

Some military leaders are particularly concerned about the effect the length and frequency of deployments to Iraq has had on morale among the volunteer forces. In order to build up troop numbers for the surge last year, deployments were extended from 12 to 15 months, and downtime between deployments was curtailed. Long and harrowing deployments have compounded stress and disillusionment within the military, leading many soldiers and officers to resign.

Some within the political establishment have also argued that a drawdown in Iraq is necessary in order to shift more forces to Afghanistan and to be better prepared for any future military conflict.

Ham said the Pentagon was considering reducing soldier deployment lengths from 15 to 12 months, but would not make any decision until the end of July.

For months, the assertion that the “surge is working” has been the talking point for the Bush administration and military leaders, most prominently David Petraeus, the commanding general of operations in Iraq.

On Friday, in an interview with the military news site Military.com, Petraeus said he had persuaded Central Command chief Admiral William Fallon and Defense secretary Robert Gates, as well as members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to curtail the drawdown in favor of a “conditions-based” approach. Some members of the Joint Chiefs, including the chairman, Admiral Mike Mullen, have said they favor a withdrawal of 10 brigades by the end of 2008.

There are two major factors behind the decision to maintain elevated troop levels. First, the situation in Iraq is extremely unstable for the US occupation. Despite talk of political stabilization and sectarian reconciliation, the reality is that US troops are facing an extremely volatile situation.

Second, the military decision is undoubtedly

conditioned by the electoral and political calculations of the Bush administration and the Republican Party. Bush is determined to avoid a resurgence of violence in Iraq prior to the 2008 elections.

Within Iraq, there are growing signs of rebellion within the Sunni militias that have allied with the US. The Awakening Council in Diyala province has halted cooperation with the US occupation and the Iraqi government, charging that local Shiite police have continued to kill Sunnis. Another Sunni militia near Baghdad recently suspended its collaboration with US forces.

In Anbar province, the Sunni Awakening Council has threatened to overthrow the provincial government if the government does not resign by April.

Tensions are also mounting in relation to US support for Turkish incursions in the north of the country. Turkey is seeking to counter moves by Kurdish authorities to form a more autonomous government. US backing for Turkey's attacks on Kurdish Iraq threatens to disrupt the longstanding US alliance with the Kurdish nationalists. Meanwhile, the Kurdish elite and the Iraqi government are at odds over the control of the oil-rich region of Kirkuk.

Military leaders are well aware that the US policy of divide and rule, combined with continued mass hostility to the US occupation, is a constant source of instability. Reported Iraqi civilian and security force deaths so far in February have already well surpassed those of the previous few months. According to a count by Icasualties.org, 622 Iraqis have been killed in February, compared to 554 in January and 548 in December.

In addition, the past few weeks have seen an increase in US troop casualties, with the US total death toll approaching 4,000. In the past two weeks, 20 US soldiers have died in Iraq, mainly from hostile fire and improvised explosive devices in and around Baghdad.

At the same time, the background to internal discussions of US policy in Iraq is the 2008 presidential election.

Arizona Senator John McCain, certain to be the Republican nominee, is running on a "no surrender" platform based on the assertion that the surge has been a success and will serve as a model for future wars. The ability to keep a lid on violence is therefore critical. During campaigning in Ohio Monday, McCain told

reporters that if he failed to convince voters that the surge was successful, "I lose... Is there any doubt?"

At a town-hall meeting in Ohio on Monday, McCain touted the progress made in Iraq as a result of the troop buildup. "They were wrong, Senator Clinton and Senator Obama, when they said that the surge would fail. And they were wrong when they said that the political process would not move forward."

The Republican Party will base its election campaign on the defense of the Iraq war, while attempting to portray its Democratic opponent as "soft on terror" for making limited appeals to antiwar sentiment.

In fact, the ongoing and escalated US military occupation of Iraq has only been possible because at every step the Democrats have opposed any serious action to halt the buildup. While maintaining tactical criticisms, the Democratic-controlled Congress has repeatedly passed war funding bills with no constraints, giving the Bush administration a free hand to wage war. Behind the disputes over policy there is an underlying unanimity on maintaining US military domination in the Middle East.



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