

Congressional hearings set stage for wider war—inside and outside of Iraq

Bill Van Auken in Washington, DC
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As the mass media's attention remained focused Wednesday on the rerun of testimony by Gen. David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker—this time before two House committees—a sparsely attended hearing on the Senate side heard a key architect of the year-old “surge” in Iraq tell Democrats that there ultimately isn't much difference between their position and that of the administration.

Testifying before the House Armed Services Committees, the senior US commander in Iraq and Washington's ambassador in Baghdad repeated the assertions that they made before the corresponding panels in the Senate day before. The surge that sent some 30,000 additional combat troops into Iraq over the last year is working. It has brought significant security gains, but this supposed progress is “fragile” and “reversible.”

Petraeus repeated his insistence that it was impossible to determine when US troop levels can be reduced below the 140,000 level that will be reached in July because such decisions must be based on “conditions on the ground.”

Likewise, he repeated his formulation that the issue of when to withdraw American occupation troops was not a matter of simple “arithmetic” but rather one of “military geometry” and “political-diplomatic calculus.” The clear implication was that such matters are far too complex to be decided by the US Congress or the democratic will of the American people.

For their part, House Democrats advanced no serious challenge to the positions put forward by Bush's handpicked general and ambassador. With relatively few exceptions, they made it clear that they are not calling for an immediate or complete withdrawal of American forces from Iraq. Rather, what they advocate is a “transition” to a different “mission” that would leave tens of thousands of troops behind to carry out “counterinsurgency” operations, train Iraqi security forces and protect US interests in the oil-rich country.

Leading the questioning Wednesday morning, House Armed Services Committee Congressman Ike Skelton (Democrat, Missouri), predicated his call for reducing the number of US troops in Iraq—not their complete withdrawal—on both the imminent threat of a new terrorist attack on the US and the likelihood of new wars abroad. The tying down of so much of the American military in Iraq hindered adequate preparations on both fronts, he contended.

“Protecting this nation from direct attack is job one. Yet our allocation of forces does not match this imperative,” said Skelton.

“Iraq is also preventing us from effectively preparing for the next conflict.”

In the afternoon session before the foreign affairs panel, Congresswoman Lynn Woolsey, a leader of the “Out of Iraq Caucus,” had read into the record a letter to President Bush signed by 92 House members affirming that they would only vote for new Iraq war appropriations if they were dedicated to “redeploying” US troops out of Iraq. The ineffectuality of this protest gesture was made painfully clear when Woolsey asked Petraeus how much needed to be appropriated and how long it would take to remove US troops from the country. The general responded that the matter was not one suited to mere arithmetic.

On the other side of Capitol Hill, Gen. Jack Keane, the former Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, who was one of the architects of the surge strategy, provided an unvarnished version of the perspective being outlined by Petraeus and Crocker. Though he remains a key advisor to the White House and the Pentagon on the occupation, Keane is retired from the military, and therefore, as he told the Senate Armed Service Committee, does not have the same “accountability” as the general and the ambassador.

Keane claimed that the surge represented “one of the most stunning achievements in the annals of counter-insurgency practice,” managing “in a matter of months” to suppress “one of the most formidable insurgencies the West has ever faced.”

He was backed by the panel's senior Republican, Senator John McCain, the presumptive presidential nominee of the Republican Party, who has based his campaign on his identification with the policy drafted by Keane. “We can hold onto the progress we have seen,” McCain said in his opening statement, “or we can choose to set a deadline for withdrawal, leading to our failure there and leading to the terrible consequences I believe will ensue.”

In his testimony before both House and Senate panels, Petraeus did not rule out a continued drawdown of American troops later this year, after a 45-day “pause” beginning in July following the withdrawal of four combat brigades that were deployed in the surge and a subsequent period of evaluation of the “conditions on the ground.”

Keane, however, categorically ruled out any possibility of such a continued reduction in occupation forces in 2008. He made it clear that the coming months will see a bloody escalation of attacks by US forces on the Iraqi resistance throughout the country.

“We will finish off Al Qaeda this year in the north,” he said. “In the south, we will still have to deal with the Shia militias. That will

also happen this year.”

Keane suggested that a US-led offensive in Basra will be initiated later in the spring, resuming where the abortive attacks carried out by Iraqi security forces—backed by US firepower—left off at the end of last month. “Our commanders were working on a campaign for the south before the recent fighting,” he said.

He also stressed that there would be no further reduction in US troop levels before Iraqi provincial elections, now set for October.

Keane was also even more explicit than Petraeus and Crocker in identifying Iran as the principal enemy that Washington perceives today in Iraq.

“The remaining major security challenge in Iraq is in the south where we must counter Iranian influence,” he said. “The Iranians have a comprehensive political, economic, diplomatic and military strategy to accomplish two objectives: 1) cause the US to fail in Iraq and withdraw prematurely; and 2) to support a stable but weak government of Iraq which is aligned with Iran as a result of their foothold and leverage in the south of Iraq.”

He continued: “It is critical to succeed. It is in the US national interests to defeat Iran in Iraq. To do so, we need a US national and regional strategy to defeat Iran in Iraq.”

The retired general’s rhetoric strongly suggested that the US military operations in Iraq are increasingly being viewed as the antechamber of a new and even bloodier war against Iran itself.

There was another notable element in Keane’s testimony, what might be termed the stab-in-the-back thesis—that the American military could lose in Iraq only if it is betrayed by the politicians. It was a theme quickly seconded by Senators McCain and Joseph Lieberman, the “Independent Democrat”—also a prominent supporter of the surge.

Keane noted pointedly that he had begun his military career 37 years ago as an Army platoon and then company commander in the Vietnam War and cited the “psychological and emotional impact” on America’s professional officer corps of the US defeat.

He asserted that those in the US military today “do not want to be a party to choosing defeat, or to be a part of an Army or Marine Corps that suffers a humiliating defeat.”

While attesting to what he claimed was the troops’ “dogged determination to succeed,” Keane warned, “we can lose politically, because we lose our will here at home, lose our determination to work through difficulty and uncertainty.” He called upon the legislators to “find the will, and yes the courage, our soldiers display routinely” and to “support the judgments of our gifted commander and ambassador.”

The retired general ended on a conciliatory note, however. He insisted that the policy of continued support for the administration’s policy and the Democrats’ call for a timetable would, in the end, have the same essential result of a more limited US presence in Iraq.

“I’m not sure that the positions are all that different,” he said, “except for the crowd that wants an immediate and precipitous withdrawal.”

Speaking earlier, the committee’s Democratic chairman, Senator Carl Levin of Michigan had already disassociated himself and his party from this “crowd,” stressing that they did not want a “precipitous withdrawal” from Iraq.

Testifying on the same panel as Keane were two critics of the Bush administration’s Iraq war policy: Dr. Andrew Bacevich, a Boston University professor and retired Army officer, who has written widely on US military and foreign policy, and Dr. Robert Malley, the Middle East and North Africa Program director at the International Crisis Group. Malley is also a former member of the US National Security Council.

While both urged the substitution of diplomatic for military efforts in Iraq, Bacevich was by far the more acerbic in his assessment of US policy and real situation that currently exists in the occupied country.

He noted that, despite the supposed success of the surge, attacks on US and Iraqi security forces are continuing at the rate of 500 a week, with little prospect that they will be significantly reduced.

As for the claims that Washington and the Maliki government have succeeded in quelling resistance and bringing about reconciliation, he pointed out: “The Shiite militias, Sunni insurgents and tribal leaders who have agreed to refrain from violence in return for arms, money and other concessions have by no means bought into the American vision for the future of Iraq. Their interests do not coincide with our own and we should not delude ourselves by pretending otherwise.”

While the war continues to cost approximately \$3 billion a week and the lives of 30 to 40 US troops a month, Bacevich insisted that it was already lost from the standpoint of the Bush administration’s original stated objectives.

The Iraq intervention, he said, was supposed to “demonstrate the viability of its Freedom Agenda and to affirm the efficacy of the Bush Doctrine of preventive war.”

While the White House had claimed that regime change in Iraq would provide an example for the democratization of the entire Middle East, the war, he said, “has produced a failed state while fostering widespread antipathy towards the United States.” Moreover, the Iraqi quagmire has “revealed the limits of American power and called into question American competence.”

The former military officer, whose son was killed while serving in Iraq, spoke forcefully about the impact of the occupation on the military. “Continuing on our present course in which soldiers head back to Iraq for their third and fourth combat tours while the rest of the country heads to the mall will break the army before it produces a policy success,” he said. “Worse, our present course—in which a few give their all while most give nothing—is morally indefensible.”

Bacevich warned that, given the continuation of the administration’s policy, “a large-scale US military presence might be required for two or three decades.”



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