

Bush speech signals stepped-up troop withdrawals from Iraq

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President George Bush made a brief four-minute statement on Thursday morning to announce that the last of the five army brigades and three marine regiments sent to Iraq as part of last year's "surge" had returned to the US and also to foreshadow a further reduction in US troop numbers later in the year.

The White House only announced that Bush would make a statement on Iraq on Wednesday, in the wake of several cautiously up-beat interviews given at the start of the week by the US commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus. The general was nominally responding to confirmation that the US military death toll in July was the lowest of the entire war. Only 11 soldiers died in Iraq last month—five from non-combat causes. The 510 recorded deaths of Iraqi security personnel and civilians was also the lowest figure in two-and-a-half years, despite a series of horrific suicide bombings in the last week of the month.

In remarks to *USA Today* on Monday, Petraeus stated that there was a "degree of durability" in the fall in violence. "If you could reduce these sensational attacks further, I think you are almost approaching a level of normal, or latent violence," he stated. In an interview with Reuters the same day, the general agreed it was "in the realm of the possible" that Iraqi government forces would have taken over security in the entire country by the end of 2009, allowing for the withdrawal of the vast bulk of US combat troops over the next 18 months.

Bush began his speech by citing Petraeus's reference to "durability" and the "success of the surge". He declared that "the progress in Iraq" had allowed the administration to continue a policy of "return on success" and steadily withdraw the surge units. Hinting at further withdrawals, the president stated: "Later this year General Petraeus will present me with recommendations on future troop levels—including further reductions in our combat forces as conditions permit." He announced that army units' tours of duty in Iraq would be reduced from 15 months to 12 months effective from August 1.

Apart from tactical nuances, Bush's assessment differed little from that made by Democratic Party presidential candidate Barack Obama during his visit to Iraq last week.

Obama has refused to describe the surge as a success as he speaks for factions of the American ruling elite who view the entire Iraq war as a costly strategic mistake that has harmed

broader US interests. He nevertheless declared that the "progress" in Iraq meant his policy of withdrawing combat troops within 16 months of taking office could be achieved—providing that the military advises that conditions permit.

Bush, as well as Republican candidate John McCain, hail the surge as a "success" and declare it has created the conditions for troops to leave Iraq. General Petraeus, who Bush and McCain repeatedly insist is the only person qualified to determine the pace of withdrawals, is projecting it is possible that most combat forces could withdraw by early 2010—roughly the same time frame proposed by Obama.

Both the Republican and Democratic camps agree that tens of thousands of troops must remain indefinitely in Iraq in order to protect the US client-state that has been installed in Baghdad and to oversee the sell-off of the country's oil and gas resources to American energy conglomerates.

Behind the agreement that troops can be withdrawn from Iraq is the consensus forming around Obama's call for more troops to be sent to Afghanistan. McCain has already joined the Illinois senator's call for the dispatch of two or three additional combat brigades to the Afghan war, stating on July 15 that "thanks to the success of the surge, these forces are becoming available".

While Bush did not mention Afghanistan on Thursday, his speech indicates that the White House is joining the consensus. Currently, there are some 147,000 troops in Iraq, including 15 combat brigade equivalents. The next major rotation is scheduled to take place in the first months of 2009, when four army brigades and two marine regiments are slated to deploy to Iraq to replace units that will have completed their tours. Petraeus's recommendation to Bush next month may well be that "conditions permit" some or all of the replacement units go to Afghanistan instead.

American and NATO forces face a growing anti-occupation insurgency operating in both southern Afghanistan and Pakistan's tribal frontier region. More fundamentally, the renewed emphasis on Afghanistan is bound up with reversing the marginalisation of US influence in Central Asia. While the US has been preoccupied with Iraq, Russia and China, through the mechanism of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, have

been in the process of establishing a virtual monopoly over the oil and gas resources of Central Asian states like Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan.

Richard Boucher, the Bush administration's Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, spelt out the real motives of the Afghan war in a speech last September. "One of our goals is to stabilise Afghanistan, so it can become a conduit and a hub between South and Central Asia so that energy can flow to the south... and so that the countries of Central Asia are no longer bottled up between two enormous powers of China and Russia, but rather they have outlets to the south as well as to the north and the east and the west," he stated.

Left out of the discussion about the "success" of the surge is the real state of affairs inside Iraq. Even as Bush delivered his brief address, developments were highlighting the fragility of the present apparent stability.

Petraeus achieved a reduction in violence primarily by overseeing a sectarian-communal bloodbath that has left Iraq divided into rival Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish spheres of influence. In 2007 alone, over one million people were driven from their homes and tens of thousands killed in vicious fighting between militias loyal to the Shiite parties in the US-backed Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and armed Sunni groups.

Over the past year, desperate Sunni communities in Baghdad and surrounding provinces have sought protection from Shiite death squads by forming US-backed "Sons of Iraq" militias. The US military is paying former Sunni fighters to patrol streets, man checkpoints and police their districts, in exchange for their collaboration against insurgent groups. There are now 103,000 "Sons of Iraq" militiamen on the US military payroll. Close to 50,000 are employed in the Sunni suburbs of Baghdad and see their primary role as protecting Sunni communities from the Shiite-dominated security forces.

Maliki has refused to incorporate the majority of the Sunni militias into the military or the police. Instead, he is demanding that they disband and allow government forces into their areas once US forces draw down. Given the extent of the sectarian tensions, it is only a matter of time before a renewed eruption of Sunni resistance to both the US occupation and its puppet government.

A potential spark is Maliki's dispatch this week of as many as 50,000 predominantly Shiite troops and police into the province of Diyala and its capital Baqubah, where close to 5,000 former Sunni guerillas have formed "Sons of Iraq" groups.

The deployment of the government forces is ostensibly to establish "law and order" and hunt down the last of the Al Qaeda-linked insurgents that are operating in the province. A *Los Angeles Times* report noted that it is viewed by local Sunnis as a hostile Shiite invasion. A member of a US-paid Sunni militia demanded to know why American troops were not

accompanying the largely Shiite Iraqi police on their house searches. When he was told it was because they trusted the police, the man replied: "Then we are going to get killed."

Communal tensions are also rising in the oil-rich province of Tamim. The Kurdish nationalist parties, the second largest bloc in the Iraqi parliament, are seeking to incorporate Tamim and its capital Kirkuk into the autonomous Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) that rules over the adjacent provinces of Irbil, Dahuk and Sulaymaniyah. Their plans are opposed by the large Arab and ethnic Turkmen communities in Kirkuk and by the Turkish government, which fears a strengthened KRG will rejuvenate separatist agitation among its large Kurdish minority.

Dealing a blow to Kurdish ambitions, the Iraqi parliament voted last week not to hold provincial elections in Kirkuk later this year and decreed that the Kurdish-dominated provincial government has to be replaced with a council comprising 10 Kurds, 10 Arabs, 10 Turkmen and two Christians. It also voted that the Kurdish-dominated military and militia units in the city had to be replaced with Arab troops from southern Iraq.

The legislation was vetoed by Iraq's presidential council, which is headed by President Jalal Talabani, a prominent Kurdish nationalist leader. It has nevertheless provoked outrage in Kurdish nationalist circles. On Thursday, the Kurdish majority of the Tamim legislature passed a resolution calling for Kirkuk to be included in the KRG regardless of the position of the Iraqi government.

The reaction has been immediate threats of conflict. Mohammed al-Jubouri, an Arab member of the Tamim parliament, told Reuters: "We completely reject Kirkuk becoming a part of Kurdistan and consider this the beginning of a crisis and strife in the city. It could lead to civil war in Kirkuk." It cannot be ruled out that the tensions over Kirkuk could escalate into open warfare between the Iraqi government and the KRG, which can mobilise a military force of over 200,000 peshmerga militiamen.

An invasion of northern Iraq by the Turkish military also cannot be ruled out. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan personally called Talabani on Thursday to voice concern over the vote in Kirkuk and to implicitly warn that Turkey would use force to prevent the city joining the Kurdish region.

These are the rotten foundations of the so-called "success" of the Iraq surge and the plans for a troop build-up in Afghanistan.



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