

# American Troops in Iraq: Whither the Republican Minority

Roni Bart

Come spring 2008, Congress will once again take up the issue of reducing the number of American troops in Iraq.<sup>1</sup> Unless afterwards there is a dramatic change for the worse on the ground, this will likely be the last time that this Congress tries to assert its influence on the issue, given the election season to follow. As during 2007, paradoxical though it might sound, the Republican minority will play a decisive role in the political interaction. Hitherto, almost all Republicans stood by their president's refusal to withdraw American troops from Iraq; a significant number might change their tune knowing that elections are a mere six months ahead.

In January 2007 the Democrats gained control of both houses of Congress, determined to use their newfound power in order to wind down the American military presence in Iraq. In the United States, however, a congressional majority is not enough to force a change in policy, let alone regarding military affairs. The president can veto any legislation (a veto that can be overturned by a two-thirds majority in Congress), and challenge the constitutionality of congressional acts on military issues based on his position as commander-in-chief of the armed forces. Furthermore, Democrats face hurdles even on the way to overriding a veto. According to procedural rules in the Senate, sixty votes are needed in order to close the debate before a vote on a resolution can be conducted ("motion to invoke cloture"). The Democratic majority in the House of Representatives

(233-202) could act on the issue to its heart content, but the paper thin majority in the Senate (51-49) could not even close debates in order to vote. Thus, beyond a potential need to overturn a presidential veto, the Republican minority in the Senate is pivotal.

## The Past

In 2007 the Democrats tried several times to chart a new course for American military deployment in Iraq. In January President Bush not only ignored the recommendation of the bipartisan Baker-Hamilton panel (the ISG – Iraq Study Group) to reduce gradually the role of the American military in Iraq, but in fact ordered a "temporary surge" of almost 30,000 additional troops. Only seven Republican senators bolted to vote with forty-nine Democrats against this strategy, four votes short of the sixty required to end a filibuster.<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Roni Bart,  
research associate at  
INSS

In the summer, the Democrats' prospects looked better, given the slow military impact of the surge in Iraq and the political stalemate there. Additional Republicans voiced reservations about the administration's policy, and some indicated their willingness to vote for moderate proposals to change it (set flexible timetables for withdrawal, mandate a change of mission, implement the ISG recommendations, rescind the 2002 resolution authorizing the war). However, by mid-September, first signs of military success and convincing congressional testimony offered by the American commander in Iraq General David Petraeus and his civilian counterpart Ambassador Ryan Crocker stalled this momentum. Petraeus's promise to start reducing the surge brigades before Christmas 2007 and bring down the number of troops to the pre-surge level by summer 2008 provided cover for wavering Republicans. White House and Pentagon pressure did the rest. The only Democratic proposal that stood a chance was an amendment to mandate longer home leaves for troops (thus indirectly and over the long run reducing the number of troops). However, after the Pentagon convinced influential Senator John Warner of Virginia (the ranking minority member on the Armed Services Committee) of the motion's negative operational impact, several Republicans joined him in withdrawing support, leaving only six of their colleagues to vote with the Democrats (one less than at the beginning of the year).

The Democrats also tried resorting to purse strings, though with no success. In the spring, Congress approved the president's budget for the war in Iraq, but attached a timetable for withdrawal. Republicans did not obstruct the process, so as not to block war funding. When Bush vetoed the bill (as

he had warned he would), the Democrats re-approved it without conditions (as they had signaled they would) so as not to shoulder the responsibility for blocking funds required for American troops at war. In November, when the president asked for \$200 billion for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Democrats submitted a bill (the Orderly and Responsible Iraq Redeployment Appropriation Act) authorizing only \$50 billion with strings attached: a narrowing of the mission to focus on counterterrorism and training; withdrawal to begin within thirty days; and a goal (not a deadline) of full withdrawal by December 2008. This time the Republicans prevented cloture by threatening a filibuster, and the Democrats relented again.

### **The Situation in Iraq**

Given the improvement in the security situation in Iraq, there is seemingly no reason to expect a change in attitude on the part of the Republican minority. However, for a number of reasons, that might not necessarily be the case. First, in his testimony General Petraeus did not offer an explanation why a surge-driven improvement will not dissipate when the surge troops are withdrawn during the first half of 2008 and security responsibility shifts to unproven Iraqi forces. For that and other reasons, a decline in the security situation may occur. Second, according to a November Pew poll, 48 percent believe that the war effort is going well (up from 30 percent in February), but a consistent proportion of Americans – 54 percent – nevertheless want to bring the troops home as soon as possible. Either regression in the security situation or consistent public opinion might change Republican attitudes.

Above all, perhaps, is that contrary to the surge rationale – “enhanced security will en-

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able political conciliation and stabilization” – increased security is as yet not channeled by Iraqi factions toward bridging the sectarian gulf. There has been no progress on legislative agreement on any of the main benchmarks: constitutional changes, regional elections, reversal of the de-Baathification of the public sector (i.e., re-hiring Sunnis expelled from government service in 2003), and management of the oil sector (i.e., proportional distribution of oil revenues between the three main groups). This lack of progress has actually been highlighted by signs that the American administration is now focused on more modest goals: renewing the UN mandate for the coalition’s military presence in Iraq; passing the national budget in the Iraqi parliament; and negotiating a long term agreement on bilateral relations with Iraq. There is less talk about “reconciliation” and more about “accommodation.”

Furthermore, some aspects of the improved security situation are in fact putting pressure on the political system. Sunni refugees are returning to find their homes occupied by Shiites, and tens of thousands of Sun-

ni ex-insurgents are blocked by the Shiite government from organizing neighborhood police-like patrols. Some Sunnis are more than hinting that now that al-Qa-eda is on the run they will soon be turning on the Shiite extremist militias. Thus, by spring 2008, the worst case will be renewed conflagration, and the best case might well be a continued political stalemate with American soldiers mired between and/or against both sides.

Democrats, while acknowledging the security gains, are emphasizing precisely this problem. In the words of Democratic presidential candidate Senator Hillary Clinton: “The fundamental point here is that the purpose of the surge was to create space for political reconciliation and that has not happened, and there is no indication that it is going to happen, or that the Iraqis will meet the political benchmarks. We need to stop refereeing their civil war and start getting out of it.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, even in a best case scenario, in which the monthly rate of American casualties stabilizes at a quarter of its previous peak (about thirty), the voters will be receptive to the Democratic argument against sustaining a bloody and hopeless presence in Iraq.

### Election Politics

Beyond the situation in Iraq, another important factor in the equation will be the political status of the Republican Party. An American president, especially if he is unpopular, is usually labeled a lame duck after the mid-term elections of his second term. Yet even a popular president turns “lame” after his party settles on his successor. The

party's presidential nominee is its leader and flag-bearer, even if the outgoing president is from the same party. Given the early schedule of the primaries, the Republican nominee might be anointed (formally or informally) by the spring, and he might prefer not to follow Bush's lead on Iraq.

While criticizing the administration's past mistakes, all five who were leading contenders for the Republican presidential nomination support current policy on Iraq. That might change either due to the decline of the security situation or a continued political stalemate, or when the primaries are over and the Republican nominee shifts to address independent voters and moderate Democrats rather than die-hard Republicans. If Senator John McCain gains the nomination, his principled insistence on staying the course in Iraq will likely not change. Rudolph Giuliani might have been just as committed, but the rhetoric of Fred Thompson, Mitt Romney, and Mike Huckabee exhibited some potential for flexibility. Fifty-five percent of Americans support the withdrawal of American troops, especially independents. No Republican nominee will want to hand his Democratic opponent such a winning hand on an issue that is by far the most important one to the electorate. At the end of 2007, even with the improving security situation on the ground, 34 percent chose Iraq as the most important problem facing the nation (with the economy coming in second with 14 percent). Furthermore, even if the nominee will not wish to moderate his position, congressional Republicans might prefer to learn from the past. They still blame Bush for their 2006 mid-term debacle because he dismissed Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld only after the elections. Pressure will be exerted by congressional candidates on the party's leader to save

the party's electoral fortunes in time.

The Republican Party in general, and especially its senatorial caucus, is entering the election year in a distinct state of inferiority. Five years ago, Americans identifying themselves politically were evenly divided between both parties, which had 43 percent support each. Nowadays the Democrats enjoy a 15 percent gap: 50-35. The Democratic Party's net favorability rate is +6 (51 percent view it favorably while 45 percent view it unfavorably); the Republican Party's is -17 (39-56). Fifty-four percent want the Democrats to control the next Congress, versus 40 percent who prefer the Republicans. In the Senate, Republicans are defending twenty-one seats (including harder-to-defend six seats of retiring senators) versus the Democrats' twelve (no retirees). They are also handicapped by a financial disadvantage: the Democrats' Senate Campaign Committees have \$23 million versus the Republicans' \$10 million. All this makes vulnerable senators running for re-election more likely to pressure the leadership, and less likely to toe the party's unpopular line on Iraq.

If in the spring following a new Petraeus-Crocker report the Democrats will try to advance moderate rather than extreme proposals, they can count on at least eight Republican senators who supported such measures in the past, half of whom are up for re-election in antiwar states. Beyond these eight, there are at least eleven Republicans on record as criticizing the administration or considering votes against its wishes, two of whom are also up for re-election and face difficult campaigns. Of these eleven, Democrats need pick only three more in order to reach sixty, the number needed for blocking a filibuster. Given the political circumstances this may yet happen.

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## Conclusion

Politics aside, there are no good options for the United States in Iraq. While acknowledging the negative effects of a withdrawal, Democrats support it nonetheless, arguing that American troops neither can nor should bring an end to an Iraqi civil war. On the other hand, most Republicans recognize the cost of a continued robust military presence but believe it is outweighed by the cost of precipitous withdrawal. Perhaps politics nearly always trumps policy considerations, but it is easier to factor in when cost-benefit analysis of policy options is so problematic.

It is likely that the political stalemate in Iraq will continue, that the Democratic congressional majority will succeed in keeping the issue on the public agenda despite improved security, and that President Bush will not agree to withdraw additional forces from Iraq in 2008 beyond the surge troops. Under such circumstances, Republicans, especially those running for office (all House members, some senators, perhaps even the eventual presidential nominee), will be pressured to exhibit flexibility or risk the wrath of the voters. It is therefore more likely than ever before that Democrats will pick up enough Republican senators in order to bring motions to a vote. That, however, might not suffice since the president can still exercise his veto. But should he do that, Bush will put the Republicans even more on the spot because they will have to uphold his veto by preventing the Democrats from overturning it with two-thirds majorities. Such a showdown will highlight the Republicans as the unpopular war party, a label they do not need in an election year; Republicans might in fact pressure the White House in order to prevent such a scenario. Thus, for purely political reasons, the Republican pivotal minority might en-

able a change in policy toward an expedited withdrawal of American troops from Iraq.

If Bush succeeds in holding his party in line, either without or with a veto, the Republicans will pay an electoral price, whose extent depends on the Democrats' success in making this a high profile campaign issue. Were a Republican to be elected president in November, Iraq policy will be deadlocked given the near certainty of Democrats retaining their congressional majority. If, on the other hand, Democrats either force Bush's hand or reach some kind of compromise with him, there will be two main outcomes. First, the United States will commence winding down its military presence in Iraq, with all the positive and negative effects that follow. Second, Iraq will recede as a campaign issue, perhaps even gradually attaining bipartisan consensus. The next president will inherit a much more manageable situation, facing "only" the Iraqi conundrum, with much less partisan opposition. That by itself would be a significant contribution to American policy, even if it comes about from purely political calculations by the Republican minority.

## Notes

- 1 My thanks to Limor Simhony and Carolina Laserna for their assistance with this research.
- 2 Democrats need eleven Republicans to reach sixty votes, despite having a caucus of fifty-one, because of the two independents caucusing with them. Joseph Lieberman (Connecticut) is a staunch supporter of Bush's policy in Iraq; and Bernie Sanders (Vermont) will not automatically side with the Democrats on Iraq either.
- 3 Quoted in Patrick Healy, "As Democrats See Security Gains, Tone Shifts," *New York Times*, November 25, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/25/us/politics/25dems.html?ref=politics>.