

RIGHT WEB

exposing the architecture of power that's changing our world

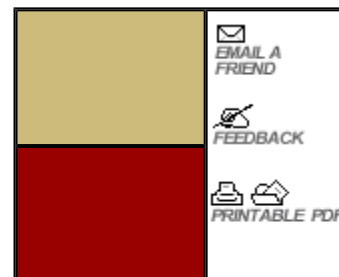


Analysis

Trapping the Next Administration in Iraq?

Ali Gharib

Posted on February 7, 2008



IRC Right Web

rightweb.irc-online.org

As President George W. Bush seeks to deeply entrench U.S. military forces in Iraq, the Congress and foreign policy pundits are looking beyond his term and debating the future of U.S. foreign policy there.

Violence is down in Iraq, and Bush hopes to use the apparent success of his surge strategy to solidify the relationship that he has laid out with the government of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. For Bush, that constitutes a long-standing commitment to Iraqi security.

But there is concern among the Democrats that Bush is trying to shore up an Iraq policy within which the next president will be forced to operate.

In November, Bush and Maliki signed a declaration of principles around which an agreement is to be negotiated by July. The agreement is meant to replace the United Nations mandate—set to expire next December—which allows foreign troops on Iraqi soil.

The security aspect of the agreement will set policy beyond the next president's inauguration on January 20, 2009.

Democrats have been railing against the idea that Bush is in a position to make these commitments. A joint subcommittee meeting was convened on the topic Wednesday in the House of Representatives.

"The next president is going to inherit a situation where, maybe if they're lucky, there has been enough peace in the meantime for political progress to be made," said Phillip Gordon of the Brookings Institution at an event there. "But more likely is that any of these factors that I mention leads to a situation in which the president is actually faced with the dilemma that we've been facing for the past four years, which is, 'Is it worth it?'"

"Is it worth it, in the context of opportunity costs, which are \$2 billion a week, American lives, American reputation in the world, and so on?"

The event at Brookings, called "Iraq: An Assessment of Policy Options in 2008," assembled policy experts to discuss a comprehensive U.S. strategy in Iraq—figuring out what's working and what's not.

Gordon gave several reasons for the gains that the U.S. has made over the past year: the U.S. troops surge; the Sunni Awakening—a movement where Sunnis are renouncing insurgents and becoming politically engaged; the cease-fire called by the 60,000-strong Mahdi Army, cleric Moqtada al Sadr's sectarian militia; and the displacement of some 20,000 Iraqis from war-torn areas.

"Those aren't entirely independent variables. They are in part linked to the surge," said Gordon. "But to what degree? If we decided to leave, that's going to be the test: whether these factors that are relieving the violence can be sustained without us there."

Gordon posed a hypothetical choice between these factors in the future and concluded that while the causes may be connected, the highest priorities are maintaining the cease-fire and encouraging the "Sunni Awakening"—both fragile propositions at present.

Just over two miles away in the Rayburn House Office Building, Rep. Bill Delahunt (D-MA) convened a joint Foreign Affairs Subcommittee hearing, where the discussion focused less on policy options in Iraq, but rather who should have a say in them.

A large part of the debate is exactly what the agreement between Maliki and Bush will contain—an unknown that fuels Democratic anger that Congress is not being called upon to ratify the agreement and has also been left out of any part of the process such as advising or oversight.

"The question of what constitutes a 'security commitment' to another country and what form such a commitment should take has been the subject of dialogue between the executive branch and Congress for decades," said George Washington University law professor Michael Matheson in his prepared remarks at the hearing.

"In 1969, the Senate adopted the National Commitments Resolution, which asserted that any 'promise to assist' a foreign country 'by the use of Armed Forces' would be a 'national commitment' that could only be given by means of a treaty, statute or concurrent resolution [requiring congressional approval]."

The agreement is likely to contain a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). The United States has these types of agreements in place with more than 100 countries, including South Korea and Germany, where the United States has permanent military installations.

SOFAs do not generally require congressional approval, but the case of Iraq is unique in several ways.

Security commitments are usually based on external threats—which Iraqi Defense Minister Abd al-Qadir al-Mufriji has said Iraq couldn't cope with on its own until 2018—but in the case of Iraq, the declaration of principles hinted that there could also be a long-standing commitment to guard against internal threats as well.

This, say critics, could tie the United States to the government of Maliki and potentially commit the United States to being caught up in a full-blown civil war.

However, the administration and its supporters insist that the agreement will allow adequate flexibility for the next president.

"If you look around the world, we have a lot of status of forces agreements," [Michael O'Hanlon](#), a Brookings senior fellow, told Inter Press Service (IPS). "But it never means that we're obligated to stay in any given place for a given length of time with troops. We always have a right to reassess and to leave. These rules govern whatever troops are there at the time they're there, but it doesn't prejudge the continuation of that presence.

"There's no legal basis for it. There's no constitutional basis for it. The next president can do what he or she wants. I'm quite confident about that," he said.

When asked by IPS if this made the hearings on Capitol Hill unnecessary, O'Hanlon said, "They're unnecessary legally. I think they're still useful in the sense that they send a message from the U.S. Congress to the world that you should not interpret whatever Mr. Bush does as somehow being able to necessarily survive his presidency and bind the next president's hands."

"Mr. Bush may be conveying a sense of permanence to these decisions that it would be unfortunate to have others interpret in that way," he said.

Ali Gharib writes for the Inter Press Service.



For **media** inquiries, email media@irc-online.org or call (617) 666-5300.

Published by Political Research Associates (PRA, online at www.publiceye.org). Copyright © 2008, PRA. All rights reserved.

Recommended citation:

Ali Gharib, "Trapping the Next Administration in Iraq?," Right Web Analysis (Somerville, MA: Political Research Associates, February 7, 2008).

Web location:

<http://rightweb.irc-online.org/rw/4875.html>

Production Information:

Author(s): Ali Gharib

Editor(s): Catherine Auer, Mike Flynn

Production: Deborah Block-Schwenk

IRC

1310 Broadway, #201, Somerville, NM 02144 | pra@publiceye.org | 617.666.5300 | www.publiceye.org

Copyright © 1998-2008, IRC-Political Research Associates.