



R.I. delegation sees various ways to pull troops from Iraq

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WASHINGTON — Violence in Iraq has declined since President Bush raised U.S. force levels last year, but the surge has failed to bring the political progress needed to defeat the insurgency, say members of Rhode Island’s congressional delegation, who unanimously opposed the strategy.

The local lawmakers continue to support legislation to scale back the U.S. mission in support of Iraqi forces, they said in recent interviews, but they do not insist on specific U.S. force reductions or firm deadlines for removing combat troops.

Sen. Jack Reed, a leader of the unofficial war council of Senate Democrats, credited the surge with what he called the “notable achievement” of reducing violence. The surge “has worked much in the way a tourniquet has worked: it stopped the bleeding,” Reed told reporters after returning last month from his 11th wartime tour of Iraq. But Reed said Iraq’s government has yet to accomplish “the very delicate political surgery needed to repair the deep wounds in this country and initiate a long-term process of healing and stability.”

Reed continues to prefer nonbinding goals for U.S. troop withdrawals over congressional efforts to force rollbacks by specific deadlines.

Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse and Representatives Patrick J. Kennedy and James R. Langevin, all of whom have supported past efforts to force combat troop withdrawals according to fixed deadlines, said in recent days that they are open to legislation that would chart a new course without hard deadlines or targets for troop levels. Whitehouse said, however, that he still prefers a bill that would force withdrawals, starting three months after the law is enacted and finishing within a year — leaving only enough U.S. forces for self-protection and for limited antiterrorist missions and support of Iraqi forces.

Reed was the most emphatic in attributing much of the improved security in Iraq to the influx of U.S. combat brigades, coupled with an aggressive new military strategy. Reed also gave the most specific reading of how political and military actions by various Iraqi groups — and the leadership in neighboring Iran — have coincided with the surge to create a setback for the insurgency and a relative lull in the violence.

Whitehouse and Kennedy assessed the security improvements in much the same way as Reed. Langevin differed, saying the violence could have been reduced in Iraq “with or without the surge.”

Reed also offered the most detailed view of why the past year’s progress is, in his words, “very, very fragile” and subject to reversal as the American force returns by next summer to the “pre-surge” level of under 130,000 troops. More than most congressional opponents of the U.S. invasion, Reed remains open to supporting a large commitment of U.S. troops in Iraq for years to come.

Reed continues to prescribe the legislative course that he helped to chart for Senate Democrats more than a year ago: a formal declaration that the United States will begin on a fixed date to scale back its mission — to contain counterinsurgency, support Iraqi forces and protect remaining U.S. troops. Reed prefers a nonbinding goal with no mandatory ceiling for the number of troops to be left in Iraq, saying this is the approach likeliest to draw enough Republican support to become law.

Last year, efforts to force troop rollbacks failed because there was not enough bipartisan support to override Mr. Bush’s veto.

Whitehouse said the military surge has had “value in bringing down the immediate level of violence” and in creating “a bit of a window for the political progress” that he considers necessary for the success of the U.S. counterinsurgency.

Whitehouse said that he now will support “essentially any vote that puts pressure on the administration” to lower the troop levels “with the goal of bringing our troops home.”

Like others in the local delegation, he reasoned that the threat of an end to U.S. troop support will hasten tough political decisions by Iraqi leaders.

Those decisions, all four Rhode Islanders said, include the integration of Sunnis into Iraqi government and society, provincial elections to give power to local leaders and a deal to share Iraq’s oil wealth among contesting ethnic and religious groups.

Langevin said American forces “have done all they can do, and it’s time to start bringing them home.” They played only a “supporting role” in reducing the violence last year, he said, attributing the lull in violence primarily to the turn against al-Qaeda by tribal leaders.

Langevin said he would support legislation to force “an immediate process of withdrawing troops now” with a conclusion “as soon as possible.” He said, however, that the timing and levels of remaining U.S. forces “in and around Iraq” should be left to military leaders.

“At the very least it’s going to take months and possibly years to complete the process of withdrawal,” Langevin said. But he said he expects the “vast majority” of American troops could be withdrawn within a year.

Kennedy, the only member of Rhode Island’s delegation to support the invasion, later reversed his position because of what he depicted as Mr. Bush’s false premises for launching the war.

Kennedy said the surge has contributed to “a marked increase in terms of stability.”

“There is no question that if you put more military boots on the ground you are going to have a better situation” in Iraq, said Kennedy — but only if the military force could be maintained indefinitely, which he said is not an option for the United States.

Since Democrats lack the votes at present to force troop withdrawals, Kennedy said, for now he favors any measure that would “send a message to the Iraqis that they are not going to be able to hang on to our coattails for an indefinite period of time. They need to know that we are going to leave and that they have got to get their act together.”

But Kennedy said it may take the election of a Democratic president to change course in Iraq decisively.