

## **Shia and Sunni MPs Fear American Withdrawal**

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Politicians from both groups warn US pullout would give radicals control.

An American withdrawal from Iraq would cause bloodshed and leave the country dominated by radical militias, Iraqi politicians from across the parliamentary spectrum have warned.

Even Sunni Arab leaders - who in the past have advocated an immediate and unconditional withdrawal of foreign troops - are among those now supporting the US troop presence and a gradual pullout over time. Many Sunni leaders say the withdrawal should be conditional on the progress of the Iraqi security forces.

Only members of parliament allied with radical Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr are now pushing for an immediate pull-out. Analysts say Sadr's rivals for power fear such radical militias will be able to seize control if Washington does not stay longer and train up the government's forces.

The warnings came amidst a political tussle in the United States over the troops. Democrats in the Senate forced a vote on legislation calling for a full US withdrawal by April 2008. The bill failed, but Democrats are expected to continue exerting pressure on the White House to set a timetable for withdrawal. Many Democratic candidates for the 2008 presidential election support a pullout.

The Sunni-led group, the Iraqi Accord Front, was the staunchest opponent of the US involvement in Iraq until sectarian violence exploded following the Samarra shrine bombing last year.

The bombing made it change its mind. A withdrawal "will adversely affect the political process", said Omar Abdul Sattar, a member of parliament from the group. "It will enable outlaws to dominate and to send Iraq back to the middle ages."

While the Accord Front advocates an eventual withdrawal, Sattar argued that that the pullout should not occur until Iraqi forces are strengthened with additional training and arms and are "rebuilt in line with professional and patriotic standards". The group also wants more Sunnis to be included in the security forces, which are still predominantly Shia.

"The presence of US forces in Iraq is helpful considering the current circumstances," said MP Adnan al-Dulaimi, former leader of the Accord Front.

"Every Iraqi wants to see these forces withdraw, and we're looking forward to the day when that occurs... But if they pull out now, the country will be in chaos because there are no Iraqi forces that can deal with security."

Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki said last week US troops could leave "any time they want" because Iraqi forces were prepared to handle the country's security. The position was a sharp reverse from Maliki's previous support of the US-led multinational forces.

Yassin Majid, an aide to the premier, later said that Maliki was misunderstood and believed Iraqi forces

should be strengthened "side-by-side with the withdrawal".

The United Iraqi Alliance, a Shia coalition and the largest bloc in parliament, which includes Maliki's Da'wa party, agree that US troops need to bolster Iraqi forces and help defeat al-Qaeda in Iraq prior to a pullout.

"The Democrats are on the right path," said United Iraqi Alliance MP Kareem al-Enizi. "They understand the size of the American loss in Iraq and want to save the lives of their soldiers. The American soldiers can't do more than the Iraqi soldiers. With training and weapons, Iraqis will be capable of handling security."

The withdrawal of the multinational forces has not been debated in parliament, which has angered MPs aligned with the radical Sadrists who accuse the Americans of wanting to stay in Iraq permanently.

The US "doesn't arm Iraqi troops properly so that they can stay longer," maintained Nassar al-Rubai, who heads Sadr's movement in parliament. "This isn't in the interest of the Iraqi people and the future of the country."

Sadiq al-Sa'di, a journalist covering Iraqi politics for the independent al-Nas radio station in Baghdad, said parties allied with militias are pushing for an immediate pullout because they know that would let them dominate the country. Other parties opposed the withdrawal for the same reason.

"The Sadrists know that they are powerful enough to control the country, so they are calling for a quick pullout, while others like Da'wa and SCIRI (the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq) reject the Sadrists' position," he said.

"This has led to fighting between Sadrists and SCIRI in Baghdad as well as the central and southern provinces."

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