

The Politics of Bush's New Iraq Policy Marcin Zaborowski, 19 January 2007

America is failing in Iraq. In January 2007 the number of American casualties have reached 3,000. The war costs American taxpayers \$8 billion per month, with the overall bill likely to reach \$2 trillion. Iraq has disintegrated into a civil war and the domestic situation in the country is constantly deteriorating. The American public has turned against the war and Bush's popularity has declined sharply. Iraq proved a major factor in the Congressional elections on 7 November 2006, which returned a Democratic majority in both Houses.

Both parties and the administration have recognised that a change of policy is needed. In March 2006 both parties of the Congress supported the creation of the bipartisan Iraq Study Group (ISG), co-chaired by James Baker and Lee Hamilton. The ISG delivered its report, containing 79 policy recommendations, on 7 December 2006. A month later, on 10 January 2006, President Bush announced his own programme of changes in Iraq, which contradicted the Baker/Hamilton report on most issues. The Bush proposal met with resounding criticism not only among Democrats but also among a considerable number of Republicans. However, although a majority of the Congress opposes Bush's strategy, it is unclear whether they will be able to block it.

- Bush's Iraq Strategic Review (ISR) contradicts the findings of the Baker/Hamilton report
- ISR is unpopular with the public and with Congress
- Congress will condemn Bush's initiative but it may not be able to derail it
- The EU should express its criticism of Bush's new Iraq policy

Baker versus Bush

The ISG (Baker/Hamilton) recommendations concerned the situation inside Iraq and options for a diplomatic offensive in the region.¹ The report proposed fundamental changes in the four following areas:

- *Introduction of Milestones/Benchmarks* – the continuation of US support for the Iraqi government should be made conditional on Baghdad meeting a number of 'milestones' concerning, among others, reconciliation, sharing of oil revenue and dismantling of sectarian militias.
- *US Military Presence* – progressive scaling down of the US military presence, replacing combat with training units and delegating the initiative to the Iraqis. All combat units could be withdrawn in 2008.
- *Iran and Syria* - The US should involve Iraq's neighbours, including Iran and Syria, in finding a diplomatic solution to the crisis.
- *Arab-Israeli Conflict* - A renewed US commitment to a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace on all fronts, including a two state solution, and a focus on relations with Lebanon and Syria.

¹ James A. Baker and Lee H. Hamilton (co-chairs), *The Iraq Study Group Report. The Way Forward – A New Approach* (Vintage Books, New York, December 2006).

The overall spirit of the Bush's 'Iraq Strategy Review' (ISR) is very different from that of the ISG report. The Baker/Hamilton report is painfully realistic, not to say gloomy, and at its heart there is a tacit acknowledgment that this war could be lost.² In order to avoid defeat and implosion of the region into an even bigger crisis, the ISG recommends that the US changes its policy in fundamental ways.

In contrast to the Baker/Hamilton recommendations, Bush's ISR is based on the assumption that victory is within reach – reforms and modifications are needed but not a fundamental policy change. Hence, on all of the points listed above there are profound differences between the two plans. The Bush proposal takes on board the idea that the Iraqi government must be pushed to tackle domestic violence and it also sets some *Milestones/Benchmarks* but, in contrast to ISG, it does not threaten to withdraw US support (finance, etc) if these are not met. On the question of *US Military Presence*, Bush's plan completely contradicts the ISG recommendation. Rather than scaling down the level of troops it proposes a 'surge', deploying an additional 21,500 troops (17,000 of them to Baghdad) and it does not specify how long they would stay.³ The ISR speaks about engaging other regional powers but it rejects talking to *Iran and Syria*. In fact, rather than reconciliation Bush offered only new threats to Tehran and announced a greater US military presence within close proximity to Iran.⁴ Finally, the ISR made no mention of the Arab-Israeli conflict or of the idea of America's engagement in the peace process.

Bush's ISR also announces a number of modifications regarding co-operation with the Iraqi forces and the management of reconstruction efforts, including:

- *Pairing of Iraqi and American Units* to protect population centres, starting with Baghdad. Once thus protected, these population centres would become sites of increased economic activity buttressed by US and Iraqi-sponsored investment and extensive job-creation programmes.
- *Doubling of PRTs*. The US would enhance the extent and the outreach of its civilian presence through the expansion of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). American civilian personnel would double in number and would operate outside the green zone. For example, in Baghdad the number of PRTs is planned to grow from one to six and in the Anbar province from one to three.⁵

Surge or Escalation?: Reactions in the US

Bush's plan has not been well received in the US. A considerable majority of public opinion (61%) opposes it and only 36 % supports it.⁶ Expert opinion, whilst not uniformly critical, is not enthusiastic either. For example, Kenneth Pollack from Brookings is one of the rare supporters of the plan. He commends the renewed emphasis on reconstruction and job-creation efforts and he agrees that sending an addition 21,500 US troops would help implement these ideas. But he also raises a number of caveats, arguing that it might be too late for the plan to work and that given that this administration has proved incompetent in handling Iraq so far, there is no reason to believe that their plan would work this time.⁷ Zbigniew Brzezinski (National Security Advisor under Carter) is far more critical. Brzezinski argues that committing an additional 21,500 troops is a 'political gimmick of no strategic benefit'. He also argues that the idea of imposing benchmarks on the Iraqi government would leave the administration with two options: 'blame and run' when these benchmarks are not met (which is most probable), or 'widen the conflict' by taking military action against Iran or Syria. Brzezinski suggests that the latter option is already being pushed for by some necons.⁸

² In their introduction, Baker and Hamilton write 'No one can guarantee that any course of action in Iraq at this point will stop sectarian warfare, growing violence, or a slide towards chaos'.

³ There was no mention of a timeframe for the troops' increase in the President's announcement and at a press briefing the Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, admitted that 'no one has a really clear idea of how long that might be'; See 'Briefing on President's Strategy', *Washington Post*, 11.01.2007

⁴ 'To Counter Iran's Role in Iraq, Bush Moves Beyond Diplomacy', *NYT*, 11.01.2007.

⁵ 'Briefing on President's Strategy', *Washington Post*, 11.01.2007. 'Highlights of the Iraq Strategy Review', National Security Council, January 2007.

⁶ 'Most Americans Opposed to Bush's Iraq Plan', *Washington Post*, 11.01.2007

⁷ Kenneth M. Pollack, 'Last Chance in Iraq', *The Brookings Institution*, 11.01.2007

⁸ Zbigniew Brzezinski, 'Five Flaws in the President's Plan', *Washington Post*, 12.01.2007

Perhaps most worryingly for Bush, there is strong opposition to his plan in the Congress. All leading Democrats expressed deep disappointment with the President's proposal, referred to the proposed troops' increase as an 'escalation', not a 'surge' as described by Bush's team. Many Republicans are also critical and very few heavyweight GOP Congressmen (not even John McCain who always argued in favour of a troops' increase) came out unreservedly in support of the plan. The bipartisan group of Senators announced a formal resolution of opposition to Bush's plan. The draft resolution uses tough language declaring that 'it is not in the national interest of the United States to deepen its military involvement in Iraq', and instead calling for the implementation of some key ideas put forward in the Baker/Hamilton report.⁹ It seems very likely that the Senate will approve this resolution (which would be followed by a similar measure by the House of Representatives) but the meaning of this motion would be no more than symbolic. Although there is mounting determination in the Congress to stop Bush's plan, it is unclear if efforts to thwart it will succeed.

Can the Congress stop Bush?

There are two ways of derailing Bush's plan that have been debated in the Congress: firstly, to use the power of the purse and deny the administration funding for additional troops, and secondly to demand congressional authorisation before the deployment of troops.

Bush is expected to submit a supplement budget request that will include \$5.6 billion for the new troops commitment and about \$1.1 billion for new job-creation commitments and aid. It is in the power of the Congress to accept or reject this proposal. A number of heavyweight Democrats, including Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and the Senate's majority leader Harry Reid, have argued in favour of denying the administration these new funds. The declared presidential candidate John Edwards has made the argument in favour of cutting war funds a major point of his campaign. However, there is no consensus on this issue. For example, two other potential Presidential candidates, senators Clinton and Obama, have not supported cutting funds at this point in time.

In any case, it appears that the administration may already have the upper hand on the funding issue. According to the National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley, the Congress has already approved enough money to allow for new troops deployment. Once new troops are on the ground in Iraq, the Congress would not deny the government new funds for fear of being seen as endangering soldiers' lives and being deemed unpatriotic.¹⁰ Very few Senators would risk being accused of that, especially in the upcoming election period.

However, a demand for Congressional authorisation before troops could be deployed is less politically risky, and hence more plausible, for Senators to push for. Senator Dodd, also a declared Presidential candidate, has argued that renewed authorisation is needed because when the Senate approved the use of force in Iraq in 2002 the troops were not committed to dealing with the civil war there.¹¹ Senator Clinton announced that she would sponsor a measure demanding that the number of troops is capped at the level pertaining from 1 January 2007 and that benchmarks similar to those proposed by the Baker/Hamilton report be imposed on the Iraqi government. Should the benchmarks not be met, the Congress can withdraw its authorisation and funding.¹²

The White House questions the Congress's legal authority to put renewed authorisation to the vote, but such votes have taken place in the past – in the 1970s during the war in Vietnam and in 1986 during the Lebanon crisis. In both cases Congressional activity considerably affected war efforts and eventually led to the withdrawal of US troops.

⁹ 'Bipartisan Senate Measure Confronts Bush Over Iraq', *Washington Post*, 18.01.2007

¹⁰ 'Bush: 'We're Going Forward'', *Washington Post*, 15.01.2007

¹¹ 'Bipartisan Senate Measure Confronts Bush Over Iraq', *Washington Post*, 18.01.2007

¹² 'Clinton Steps Up Criticism of War in Iraq', *Washington Post*, 18.01.2007

What Position for the EU?

The EU should make it clear that it favours the ideas set out in the Baker/Hamilton report over those proposed by Bush's ISR report. While some ideas in the Bush proposals, for example greater civilian engagement and emphasis on reconstruction, are steps in the right direction, it might be too late for them to be carried out and they do not sufficiently justify additional troops deployment. Bush's confrontational tone *vis-à-vis* Iran and his ignoring of the Arab-Israeli issue contradict the European position on these questions. In addition, as argued by Brzezinski, Bush's plan could serve as a prelude to widening the conflict and striking against Iran at some point in the future, perhaps before the end of Bush's presidency. In addition to these regional implications, it is also worth bearing in mind that Bush's Iraq policy is losing its momentum in the US and the opposition is clearly gaining strength.