



Pentagon Considering Alternatives for Iraq

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WASHINGTON -- Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates acknowledged Tuesday that Pentagon planners were considering alternative war plans in case the current buildup of forces in Iraq failed to quell ongoing violence in Baghdad, saying the administration strategy "is not the last chance" to salvage the war-torn country.

Although he insisted the administration would give the new offensive the time and funding it needed, Gates told the Senate Armed Services Committee that if the strategy did not show the hoped-for results, the military would probably shift its efforts to a strategy centered on moving U.S. troops "out of harm's way."

"I think that if this operation were not to succeed -- and we clearly are hoping it will succeed, planning for it to succeed, allocating the resources for it to succeed -- but I would tell you that I think I would be irresponsible if I weren't thinking about what the alternatives might be if that didn't happen," Gates testified.

Before Tuesday, administration officials had refused to discuss what steps they might take if President Bush's strategy, involving 21,500 extra troops, were to fail. But many congressional critics believe the plan has little chance of success.

Although Gates did not go into detail about the Pentagon's thinking on a post-buildup plan, his acknowledgment that such a scenario would include shifting troops out of heavy combat areas could lend support to Democratic calls to immediately move American forces into more-secure locations, perhaps in neighboring Kuwait or northern Kurdish areas of Iraq.

It also was a stance much more in line with recommendations made in December by the Iraq Study Group, a high-profile collection of former government officials that at one time included Gates. The panel called for a stepped-up effort to train Iraqi forces and for a gradual withdrawal of combat troops.

Gates also appeared to embrace another recommendation by the Iraq Study Group that has been supported by congressional Democrats: the threat to withdraw financial or political support from the Iraqi government if officials do not live up to their commitments.

Gates said the administration was drawing up a detailed checklist of benchmarks to judge the Iraqi government's commitment to the strategy, adding "there is always the potential of withholding assistance" if Prime Minister Nouri Maliki fails to deliver on his promises.

Still, Gates expressed optimism that the new security plan was off to a positive start. Army Gen. George W. Casey Jr., the outgoing commander in Iraq, told Gates this week that the first Iraqi brigade to arrive in Baghdad came at only 60% strength, but that 25% of the brigade's soldiers were on approved leave.

Last week, Gates said he was disappointed with the levels of Iraqi troops arriving, a key measurement being closely monitored by the administration as a test of the Iraqi government's commitment to the new plan. But Tuesday, Gates said Casey had assured him that the number of Iraqis on approved leave made the units look weaker than they really were.

Casey "felt that the level of turnout for the brigade, in his opinion -- and I don't think I'm misquoting him -- was 'better than expected,'" Gates said. "At this early stage, it's still very impressionistic, and I would say that I think that Gen. Casey's words have been, 'So far, so good.'"

Despite Gates' vow to give the troop buildup the funding and support it needed, he reiterated his view that the increased manpower would be needed only for several months; he told Sen. Robert C. Byrd (D-W.Va.) that he believed the withdrawal of American forces could begin before the end of the year.

"It seems to me that if the plan to quiet Baghdad is successful and the Iraqis step up," Gates said, "I would hope we would be able to begin drawing down our troops later this year."

Some supporters of the buildup and experts in counterinsurgency warfare have argued that the increase in forces would need to last 18 months to two years to effectively drive insurgents permanently underground.

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But the issue appears to be unresolved within the administration.

Bush repeatedly has refused to put a timetable on the length of the buildup, saying he will give the offensive as much time and resources as it requires. Gates' stance, however, appeared to reflect that of skeptics within the military, including Casey, who has only reluctantly backed the plan.

The tepid endorsement by some in the Pentagon of the plan -- which has been enthusiastically embraced by the incoming commander in Iraq, Army Gen. David H. Petraeus -- has angered Republican advocates, including Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz).

McCain and two other Republicans on the Senate Armed Services Committee vented that anger Tuesday by voting against Casey's nomination to become the Army's chief of staff, though his nomination moved to the full Senate on 14-3 vote. Another backer of the buildup, Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.), lectured Gates at the hearing, telling the new Defense secretary that a longer troop increase may be necessary.

"If you're asking somebody in eight months to solve a 1,400-year-old religious dispute, bring people together who have suffered under a dictatorship for 30 years, reconstruct an economy that was raped by a dictator -- that's a pretty tall order," Graham said.

By Peter Spiegel
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