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The Levin–Reed Amendment on Iraq: Cut in the U.N. and Run

James Jay Carafano, Ph.D., and James Phillips

Senators Carl Levin (D–MI) and Jack Reed (D–RI) drafted an amendment, since introduced by themselves and other senators as S.A. 2087 to the defense authorization bill, that would require the Bush Administration to begin redeploying U.S. forces from Iraq within 120 days; restrict the role of any remaining forces to force protection, counterterrorism, training, and logistical support operations by April 2008; and turn over the big issues in Iraq to a U.N.-authorized mediator. The forced, premature withdrawal of American troops from Iraq would have disastrous consequences for Iraq, the Middle East, and American foreign policy and would lead to a full-scale humanitarian disaster. Congress should reject outright calls for America to cut and run and instead allow the military to finish the job of training Iraqi security forces that are capable of supporting the government, dealing with sectarian violence, and providing for the safety of the civilian population.

An Irresponsible Exit Plan. No one disputes that a continued U.S. military presence cannot ensure success in Iraq unless Iraqis cooperate in building an effective government, but a precipitous withdrawal of U.S. support would unquestionably guarantee failure, with disastrous results for Iraq, its neighbors, and U.S. national interests.

Many in Congress who criticize the Bush Administration for failing to plan for the consequences of invading Iraq now turn a blind eye to the disastrous consequences of a rush to exit. Several National Intelligence Estimates have pointed

out the grave implications of a rapid withdrawal of U.S. forces—not only for Iraq but for the entire region, due to the destabilizing spillover effects of a failed Iraqi state. Congress has also been warned by Iraqi officials of the consequences of a premature withdrawal. Iraq’s foreign minister Hoshiyar Zebari told the Associated Press last week, “We have held discussion with members of Congress and explained to them the dangers of a quick pullout and leaving a security vacuum. The dangers could be a civil war, dividing the country, regional wars and the collapse of the state.”

The Levin–Reed amendment glosses over the potentially catastrophic consequences of a rapid U.S. withdrawal from Iraq by adopting a diplomatic fig leaf: It proposes a vaguely-defined international diplomatic effort that would include the appointment of an international mediator for Iraq under the auspices of the United Nations Security Council. It is difficult to see how this would resolve Iraq’s problems, particularly if the security situation deteriorates due to a reduction in American military operations. U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon yesterday warned against the dangerous consequences of a rapid American pullout: “It is not my place to inject myself into this discussion taking

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place between the American people and the administration and Congress,” Ban told a news conference. “However, I would like to tell you that great caution should be taken for the sake of the Iraqi people.” He stressed that “Any abrupt withdrawal or decision may lead to a further deterioration of the situation in Iraq.”¹

A sudden U.S. withdrawal would increase the likelihood of a full-fledged civil war and the disintegration of the Iraqi army into factions. The defection of soldiers (along with their heavy equipment) to various militias would bolster the militias’ firepower and capacity to seize and hold terrain. The result would be a bloody and protracted civil war, similar to the conflict in Bosnia following the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

The chief beneficiary of a rapid U.S. pullout would be Iran, which has considerable influence over Iraq’s Shiite majority—about 60–65 percent of the population. If Iraq implodes, Iran could quickly gain dominance over an emerging “Shiastan” rump state endowed with the bulk of Iraq’s oil reserves. This would give Iran additional resources and a staging area to escalate subversive efforts targeted at the Shiite majority in Bahrain and Shiite minorities in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. These and other countries look to the United States to serve as a guarantor against an aggressive Iran. If the United States fails to follow through on its commitment to establish a stable government in Iraq, it would severely undermine its credibility. Abandoning Iraqi allies would erode the confidence of other allies in U.S. leadership and further fuel conspiracy theories about American plots to carve up Iraq to keep Arabs weak and divided.

Another beneficiary of U.S. retreat would be al-Qaeda. An unstable, failed state in Iraq would enable al-Qaeda and other radical groups to carve out a sanctuary for recruiting a new generation of suicide bombers and hand them a strategically located staging area for deploying terrorists for attacks on Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and elsewhere around the world. The declassified “key judgments” of the April 2006 National Intelligence Estimate noted that a perceived victory for

jihadists in Iraq would boost their strength and ability to threaten Americans.

The U.S. also has a responsibility to avert a humanitarian crisis in Iraq. Iraq is a mosaic of ethnic, sectarian, and tribal subgroups. Baghdad and other major cities include significant intermingling of Sunni and Shiite Arabs, Kurds, Turcomans, Assyrians, Chaldeans, and other Christians. Instability and civil war would put many of these people in flight, creating a vast humanitarian crisis that would dwarf those seen in Bosnia and Kosovo and rival the scenes of horror and privation witnessed in Congo, Rwanda, and Sudan. Not only would Iraqis be put at risk of disease, starvation, and violence, but with the government unable to meet their basic needs, Iraqi refugees would fall under the control of the sectarian militias, turning Iraq into Lebanon on steroids.

The President’s Role. No President can afford to accept congressional usurpation of his constitutional authority as commander in chief of the armed forces, a precedent that would hamstring the U.S. war effort not only in Iraq, but also in possible future wars. Congress’s imposing arbitrary deadlines in Iraq would deprive the President and his military commanders of the flexibility, time, and resources needed to wage war successfully. Progress in Iraq is likely to be painstakingly slow, and congressional meddling calibrated according to political conditions in Washington is unlikely to help the situation. Congress must be realistic about the pace and scope of change in Iraq and cognizant of its limited constitutional role in warfighting and U.S. foreign policy.

Give the Surge a Chance. The surge of U.S. troops deployed to Iraq was completed only last month, and the surge in operations has begun only in the last three weeks. It is too soon to evaluate the success of this new strategy.

Underscoring this point, the Levin–Reed amendment was introduced in the Senate the day before the Bush Administration released its initial report on Iraq’s progress in meeting the benchmarks for success that Congress mandated in the defense supplemental bill last spring. Gen-

1. Alexandra Olson, “U.N. Chief Against Abrupt U.S. Pullout,” Associated Press, July 16, 2007.

eral Petraeus, the commander of U.S. forces in Iraq, and Ryan Crocker, the U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, are slated to give a full report to Congress in September. It would be a grave mistake to give up on Iraq before the results of the Bush Administration's new counterinsurgency strategy are carefully evaluated.

—James Jay Carafano, Ph.D., is Assistant Director of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies and Senior Research Fellow for National Security and Homeland Security in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, and James Phillips is Research Fellow for Middle Eastern Affairs in the Allison Center, at The Heritage Foundation.