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THE FIGHT FOR IRAQ

U.S. Faces Iraq Crossroads

Timing Issues Raise Pressure On White House, Pentagon

By YOCHI J. DREAZEN and GREG JAFFE
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In yet another effort to secure Baghdad, President Bush stood next to visiting Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in July and announced plans to shift thousands of additional American forces to Iraq's capital.

With American and Iraqi deaths rising since then, the strategy's apparent failure to stem the violence is forcing the Bush administration to weigh a host of unpalatable choices -- and leaving the White House and Pentagon with a dwindling amount of time to decide what to do next.

Shortly after next month's U.S. midterm elections, a bipartisan commission headed by former Secretary of State James Baker III will present the administration with recommendations for altering U.S. policy in Iraq. If the administration opts to maintain U.S. troop levels, it will have to decide early next year whether to change longstanding Pentagon policy to allow deployment of National Guard and Army Reserve troops for a second stint in Iraq.

The military is also in the midst of a re-evaluation of its Iraq strategy. Earlier this month, Gen. Peter Pace, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, asked each of the armed services to send their best commanders with Iraq experience to the Pentagon for 60 days to generate options for how the U.S. might shift its counterinsurgency strategy.

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The pressure to change course in Iraq will grow stronger if Democrats regain one or both chambers of

Congress. More than 60% of Americans regard the war in Iraq as a mistake, and Democrats have promised to subpoena the Pentagon for clearer statistics about the situation in Iraq if they retake either the House or Senate. They say they would use control of the nation's purse strings to force the administration to re-evaluate its Iraq policy.

The upshot is the administration's vow to maintain its course of action in Iraq appears untenable in the face of the rising death toll and the war's mounting unpopularity among Americans.

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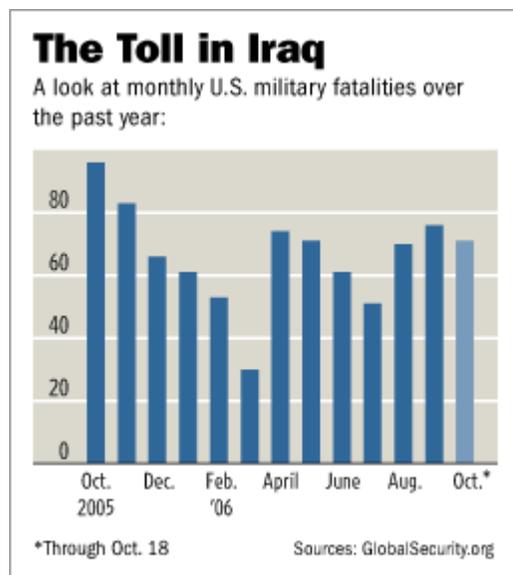
"It's just not enough to say 'stay the course,'" says Rep. Bob Inglis, a South Carolina Republican. "It's very important to lean on the Iraqi leadership and get them to establish reasonable security so we can give them their country back. The longer they take, the more they risk losing American public support and congressional support."

Mr. Inglis, who visited Iraq in mid-August, said American policy makers also have to rethink their definition of victory. "The main objective has to be American security, not whether we're accomplishing something for the Iraqi people," he says.

Rep. Chris Shays, a Connecticut Republican locked in a re-election battle, says the strategy "is failing," and the White House should set a time line for U.S. withdrawal as a way of spurring the Maliki government to make the political compromises that could help stem sectarian violence.

"The president is sending the wrong message; there have to be deadlines," Mr. Shays says.

Senior military officials, such as Gen. John Abizaid, the top commander in the Middle East, until recently have said the U.S. wouldn't know until December whether the strategy to secure Baghdad is working. But commanders are now acknowledging the approach is failing to make much of an impact.



In a briefing to reporters yesterday, the U.S. command in Iraq said attacks in Baghdad had risen 22% during the first weeks of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan despite thousands more U.S. and Iraqi forces in the city. Maj. Gen. William Caldwell, chief U.S. military spokesman there, said commanders are working with the Iraqi government to "refocus" security measures. October has been an especially bloody month for U.S. forces, with 10 soldiers killed Tuesday -- the most single-day fatalities since January 2005 -- and 73 American troops killed overall.

One of the most wrenching questions for the military is how long it can keep 140,000 troops in Iraq and an additional 20,000 in Afghanistan. The repeated deployments of active-duty personnel have put them under such pressure that senior military officials say

they will likely have to make even greater use of the National Guard and Army Reserve to sustain the force levels.

At their peak, about 50,000 Guard and Reserve forces were in Iraq, accounting for about 40% of the total force at that time, military officials say. Guard and Reserve forces now account for about 12% of U.S. troops in Iraq, according a Pentagon spokeswoman. Senior Army officers have already begun asking the Bush administration to consider changing policy to let them call up larger numbers of Guardsmen and Reservists.

At issue are Pentagon policies that limit Reserve and Guard forces to 24 months of cumulative active duty. Most Guardsmen and Reservists who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan already have spent 18 months on active duty and can't be called up again for either of those two conflicts unless the rules are changed, because a deployment lasts more than six months.

Any move to send reserve forces involuntarily back to either Iraq or Afghanistan would be deeply unpopular politically.

Elected officials from both parties also say it is dangerous for states to have so many of their Guard troops -- traditionally used in disaster-response and homeland-security roles -- deployed to the war zones.

Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski, a Democrat, says having so many of his state's forces overseas is limiting his ability to respond to natural disasters. "We need our National Guard home in case of an emergency," he says.

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