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Iraq's glacial pace of reform worries Inglis

Both congressman and Sen. Graham see military progress after Middle East visits

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By Dan Hoover
STAFF WRITER

dchoover@greenvillenews.com

U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham and U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis share optimism over prospects for military success in Iraq, but Inglis appears to have the deeper concerns about the Baghdad government's ability to match it with political reforms.

Iraq was the dominant topic recently when Inglis met with reporters and editors of The Greenville News and Graham held a press conference.

Graham was back from his eighth trip to Iraq, one that involved 11 days on the ground as an Air Force Reserve colonel. Inglis, along with Gov. Mark Sanford, had accompanied Graham to Afghanistan for an Aug. 11 visit with South Carolina National Guard troops there.

Inglis, who has made three trips to Iraq, acknowledged Graham might have a different perspective because of his more numerous trips to the region.

Advertisement Graham said the U.S. role is to "give the Iraqi people the ability" to make new choices. Inglis said that as long as the United States is paying the freight, it has "a right to insist" on change geared toward stability.

Where Graham said his personal observations suggested "the Iraqi people are tired of the killing, they're tired of the murdering," Inglis indicated they aren't there yet as he expressed hope they'd soon "stop beheading each other." 'Breakthrough' seen

In fact, Graham sees "a breakthrough" at hand.

Inglis cited Iraqi officials as being unmoved by Washington's sense of urgency, but Graham spoke of Iraqi officials beginning to feel the heat from the man in the street.

Graham cited U.S. troops moving about the countryside taking out al-Qaeda operatives. Inglis mentioned the possibility of a pullback to fortified enclaves.

Even their optimism was nuanced.

Graham said he's "never been more optimistic" about the chances for success.

Asked if he shared that outlook, Inglis deferred to what he said was Graham's greater experience there, noting, "If he's optimistic, I'm optimistic. I hope his optimism is well-placed."

Where Graham spoke of a Maliki government that is "feeling the pressure of people who are tired of the killing," Inglis came away from a meeting with Iraqi officials with a different view of their interest.

He recalled an anxious congressional delegation, poised on the edge of a sofa, pitching their case for speedy political reforms while two Iraqis "sat there, comfortable and, apparently, unmoved.

"For me, that flipped the switch," Inglis said. "If you're not going to show the level of impatience we think you should be showing, this is not a good deal." Cultural differences

But Inglis said that could be the result of cultural differences between get-to-the-point Americans and Middle Easterners who take a more roundabout way of getting there.

Graham had his own anecdotes.

Although stationed in Baghdad, Graham said he was able to visit various parts of Iraq "to get a feel for the landscape."

What he saw and heard triggered his heightened optimism, from both political and military standpoints.

Graham said he observed the change first-hand in Ramadi, the heart of Sunni-dominated Anbar province that last year had been deemed lost to al-Qaeda insurgents.

That changed, he said, when U.S. troops had the numbers to get out of their bunkers and go after the insurgents while engaging local communities and living with Iraqi police and troops.

Helping that along, Graham said, was an al-Qaeda leadership that "overplayed its hand" with brutality and imposition of the harsh Sharia law on the more secular-minded Iraqis.

He recounted an incident in which al-Qaeda gunmen entered a village and, to make a point, doused an 8-year-old boy with gasoline and set him afire. Dwindling patience

Inglis spoke more in terms of dwindling American patience, including his own 4th Congressional District, measuring its remaining length in months, not years.

"We're at risk. We're happy to spend money around the world; that's one thing. We can make the money again, but we can't make the blood again," he said.

Absent political progress, Inglis said he envisions U.S. troops withdrawing to fortified bases, emerging to fight insurgents as necessary and protect Iraq's borders.

That, he said, "is not a good outcome."

He lamented that President Bush steadfastly resists instituting a rewards-and-consequences timetable that would push Baghdad toward political reforms that would complement current military gains against the insurgency and hasten future improvement.

"It's the lack of laying out a plan that causes people to ask when this is going to end," Inglis said.

Graham cited instances of al-Qaeda-led insurgents turning, at first, everyday Iraqis against them, then the powerful local sheiks. 'No smoking'

"One of the breaking points was that they tried to outlaw smoking. If anyone knows anything about Iraq and the Middle East, that did not go over well," he said. "Their agenda, once lived under, was not well received.

"People turned on al-Qaeda and they've been run out of Anbar province."

The added combat power of the Bush administration's troop surge reinforced the various communities' desire

to be rid of al-Qaeda, Graham said.

Illustrative of the change is that in 2006, 1,000 men joined the security services in Anbar while in 2007, the figure is already at 12,000, he said.

"The Sunni sheiks have told the young men of Anbar to make sure al-Qaeda doesn't come back, join the police," Graham said, adding that the ability to make such choices "is spreading throughout the country."

The breakthrough he predicted will include local elections, ending Baghdad's practice of appointing Shiite leaders in Sunni areas.

To Graham, "The biggest change since April is that the Sunnis have come together. They're willing to play politics. They have one voice. They've rejected al-Qaeda, and they're willing to do business with their Shia and Kurdish colleagues.

"The pressure is coming from the local level," a frustration Graham said is "going to push up from Baghdad and lead to reconciliation."
