



Posted on Sun, Oct. 07, 2007

GOP leaders restless on Iraq

Inglis urges hearings to pressure Iraqi government

By JAMES ROSEN

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WASHINGTON — U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis is spearheading support among senior Republican lawmakers for congressional hearings to pressure the Iraqi government to make progress on benchmarks set by Congress.

The move by the Upstate Republican likely could draw opposition from President Bush and his staunchest Iraq war allies in Congress.

The drive for “accountability hearings” reflects mounting frustration in GOP ranks over the failure of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s fractured central government in achieving 18 benchmarks set by Congress. They include narrowing sectarian divides and sharing oil reserves.

“It gets to a point where we have spent enough time and enough lives and enough money in this one particular spot,” said Inglis, one of 17 GOP House members to vote against the U.S. military surge in February.

“Our military has succeeded,” said Inglis, a fifth-term Travelers Rest Republican. “The question is whether Iraqi politicians can succeed. If they fail, it is not a U.S. failure. Let them go baby-sit a civil war.”

With an eye toward the 2008 elections and softening public resolve on the war, more GOP congressmen could well follow Inglis’ lead.

Inglis’ bid to spur political movement in Baghdad puts him at odds with fellow Palmetto State Republican U.S. Rep. Joe Wilson of Lexington County, chairman of the House’s Victory in Iraq Caucus.

Inglis’ February vote against the surge angered many of his Upstate constituents. He acknowledged his new initiative might cause a backlash back home, though he wonders why.

“Once people get over this feeling of ‘he was disloyal to the team,’ I think they get to, ‘Well, gee, we do believe in accountability,’” Inglis said.

While several prominent Republican senators have broken with President Bush on Iraq — most notably U.S. Sen. John Warner of Virginia — their House counterparts largely have backed the president even as public support for the war has dropped.

However, there are signs that Bush’s support among House Republicans is fading. GOP House members are trying to recapture control of Congress in next year’s elections, when they also must face re-election.

“In general, you’re going to see more of a splitting with Bush,” said John Geer, a Vanderbilt University political scientist who has written on congressional elections.

“They’re (Republican incumbents) going to seek mechanisms by which they can show their opposition on Iraq and gain credibility with the electorate,” Geer said. “They will find ways to get those extra few votes to keep their jobs.”

Last week, the House overwhelmingly passed a measure giving the Bush administration two months to deliver to Congress a plan for withdrawing combat troops from Iraq.

Though the Democratic-controlled House has passed various bills this year setting withdrawal dates or tying future money for the war to a pullout, the vote Tuesday was the first time large numbers of GOP members — all but 16 — went on record as requiring a withdrawal plan.

NEED FOR HEARINGS

Inglis asked for hearings to pressure the Maliki government in a Sept. 26 letter to U.S. Rep. Tom Lantos, a California Democrat and chairman of the House Foreign Relations Committee, and to U.S. Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen of Florida, the panel’s senior Republican.

“The lack of political progress by the government of Iraq is a point of frustration for both Democrats and Republicans,”

Inglis said. "I'm writing to request a full committee hearing on the means and methods of bringing accountability to the reconciliation process in Iraq."

Ros-Lehtinen didn't join Inglis and the other 16 Republicans in February in opposing the U.S. military surge in Iraq. But she said she backs his request for hearings.

"All of us are anxious to see progress toward a political settlement among Iraqi factions that will lead to greater stability and security in the country and will further U.S. strategic interests in the region," the Floridian said.

Inglis said "there has been nowhere near enough progress" by the Iraqi government in reaching what he called "the big three" benchmarks Congress mandated — without deadlines — in May.

They are:

- Sharing oil revenues among Iraq's 18 provinces and especially among its three main sects — Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish Muslims
- Allowing former members of Saddam Hussein's ruling Baath Party to hold government, military and civilian posts
- Adopting constitutional amendments guaranteeing the rights of Sunnis, the minority sect who held sway under Saddam, and other religious and ethnic minority groups.

"People are dying in Iraq because of the lack of action on these reconciliation goals," Inglis said. "That gives us the right and the obligation to insist on progress."

GOP OPPOSITION

Hearings that would amplify criticism of the Iraqi government are all but certain to draw opposition from Bush and his staunchest war allies in Congress.

The president has prodded Maliki to quicken the pace of political progress. But, Bush says it is up to the Iraqi people, not the White House or Congress, to pressure the prime minister and determine the fate of his government.

Lawrence Butler, a State Department official who helps oversee Middle East policy, told lawmakers Thursday that agency rules prohibit him and his peers from publicly criticizing Maliki and the Iraqi government.

Such criticism, Butler said, would undermine U.S.-Iraqi relations and could endanger Americans working in Iraq.

Wilson, who also sits on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said he opposes Inglis' bid to hold accountability hearings.

Wilson said Gen. David Petraeus, U.S. military commander in Iraq, and Ambassador Ryan Crocker already have helped achieve political progress by pointedly expressing U.S. concerns to Maliki.

"Our people on the ground should make the determination of planning and consequences," Wilson said. "Congress should not micromanage the war."

Last month, during his eighth visit to Iraq, Wilson said he saw signs of progress on the main U.S. benchmarks, though he acknowledged that progress hasn't been codified yet in Iraqi law or constitutional amendments.

Asked whether he has confidence in the Maliki government, Wilson paused.

"That was a government elected by the people of Iraq, so I defer to them to determine their government," he said.

McClatchy Washington Bureau reporter Renee Schoof contributed to this report. Rosen covers Washington for McClatchy Newspapers in South Carolina.