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As Democrats See Iraq Gains, a Shift in Tone

By [PATRICK HEALY](#)

As violence declines in Baghdad, the leading Democratic presidential candidates are undertaking a new and challenging balancing act on [Iraq](#): acknowledging that success, trying to shift the focus to the lack of political progress there, and highlighting more domestic concerns like health care and the economy.

Advisers to Senators [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) and [Barack Obama](#) say that the candidates have watched security conditions improve after the troop escalation in Iraq and concluded that it would be folly not to acknowledge those gains. At the same time, they are arguing that American casualties are still too high, that a quick withdrawal is the only way to end the war and that the so-called surge in additional troops has not paid off in political progress in Iraq.

But the changing situation suggests for the first time that the politics of the war could shift in the general election next year, particularly if the gains continue. While the Democratic candidates are continuing to assail the war — a popular position with many of the party's primary voters — they run the risk that Republicans will use those critiques to attack the party's nominee in the election as defeatist and lacking faith in the American military.

If security continues to improve, President Bush could become less of a drag on his party, too, and Republicans may have an easier time zeroing in on other issues, such as how the Democrats have proposed raising taxes in difficult economic times.

“The politics of Iraq are going to change dramatically in the general election, assuming Iraq continues to show some hopefulness,” said Michael E. O’Hanlon, a senior fellow at the [Brookings Institution](#) who is a supporter of Mrs. Clinton’s and a proponent of the military buildup. “If Iraq looks at least partly salvageable, it will be important to explain as a candidate how you would salvage it — how you would get our troops out and not lose the war. The Democrats need to be very careful with what they say and not hem themselves in.”

At the same time, there is no assurance that the ebbing of violence is more than a respite or represents a real trend that could lead to lasting political stability or coax those who have fled the capital to return to their homes. Past military successes have faded with new rounds of car bombings and kidnappings, like the market bombing that killed at least eight on Friday in Baghdad.

Neither Mrs. Clinton, Mr. Obama nor the other Democratic candidates have backed away from their original opposition to the troop escalation, and they all still favor a quick withdrawal from Iraq. But Mrs. Clinton, for one, has not said how quickly she would remove most combat forces from Iraq or how many she would leave there as president. Former Senator [John Edwards](#), by contrast, has emphasized that he would remove all combat troops from the country, while Mr. Obama favors withdrawal at a rate of one to two brigades a month. Those plans stand in contrast to the latest American strategy of keeping most American combat brigades in Iraq but giving them an expanded role in training and supporting Iraqi forces.

The Democratic candidates received a boost yesterday from a former American commander in Iraq, Lt. Gen. [Ricardo S. Sanchez](#),

who delivered the party's response to Mr. Bush's radio address. General Sanchez said that despite the security gains, there was "no evidence" that Iraq's leaders were working toward a peace accord. He endorsed a Democratic measure in the House to withdraw all combat troops by December 2008.

Lately, as the killing in Baghdad and other areas has declined, the Democratic candidates have been dwelling less on the results of the troop escalation than on the lack of new government accords in Iraq — a tonal shift from last summer and fall when American military commanders were preparing to testify before Congress asking for more time to allow the surge to show results.

This is a delicate matter. By saying the effects of the troop escalation have not led to a healthier political environment, the candidates are tacitly acknowledging that the additional troops have, in fact, made a difference on the ground — a viewpoint many Democratic voters might not embrace.

"Our troops are the best in the world; if you increase their numbers they are going to make a difference," Mrs. Clinton said in a statement after her aides were asked about her views on the ebbing violence in Baghdad.

"The fundamental point here is that the purpose of the surge was to create space for political reconciliation and that has not happened, and there is no indication that it is going to happen, or that the Iraqis will meet the political benchmarks," she said. "We need to stop refereeing their civil war and start getting out of it."

While the war remains a top issue for many Democratic voters, the candidates are also turning to pocketbook concerns with new intensity as the nominating contests approach in January. Mrs. Clinton devoted a week to her energy plans recently, and spent Monday and Tuesday talking about the economy. Mr. Obama, meanwhile, still draws strong applause from audiences when he criticizes Congress for authorizing the war and Mr. Bush for waging it, but he is increasingly highlighting other concerns.

"We've never seen gas above \$3 in November," Mr. Obama told a crowd on a recent evening in Allison, Iowa. "People are working harder for less. Folks are maxing out on their credit cards, trying to stay afloat. People are struggling. And it doesn't seem like Washington is listening."

Mr. Obama's spokesman, Bill Burton, said that the reduction of violence in Iraq was "welcome news," but he also noted that a record number of troops had been killed this year and that political differences among the Iraqis had not been bridged.

"The best leverage we have to get Iraq's political leaders to do their job is to immediately begin to withdraw our troops," Mr. Burton said.

Mr. Edwards told reporters in Des Moines on Tuesday that there was not enough political movement to justify reassessing his Iraq policy at this stage.

"I think the underlying question has not changed in Iraq, and that question is whether there has been any serious effort, serious movement on the political front," Mr. Edwards said. "Until there is political reconciliation between the Sunni and the Shia, there cannot be stability, there will not be an end to the violence. So I think that's the ultimate test, and I have seen very little progress if any on that front."

Mr. Edwards regularly brings up Iraq, but his focus is less on the troop escalation and more on his opponents' judgment, especially Mrs. Clinton's. He frequently lumps her in with Mr. Bush by noting her Senate votes supporting both the Iraq war and a recent

resolution designating the Iranian [Revolutionary Guard](#) as a terrorist organization.

“We’ve seen this movie before; we know how it ends,” Mr. Edwards says about Iraq and Iran.

Senator [Joseph R. Biden Jr.](#), a Democratic candidate who has been praised by his rivals as a thoughtful voice on Iraq, agreed in a statement that there had been “real progress on security” in Iraq. On the campaign trail, though, he frames discussions of the troop escalation around his plan to create strong regional governments in Iraq, rather than talking about the declining violence as an end in itself.

Two other Democratic contenders, Senator [Christopher J. Dodd](#) of Connecticut and Representative [Dennis J. Kucinich](#) of Ohio, have also insisted that there is no “military solution” for Iraq and that troops should be withdrawn swiftly.

One candidate favors withdrawing all troops immediately and unconditionally: Gov. [Bill Richardson](#) of New Mexico.

“Let’s be clear: 40 dead American troops is 40 too many,” said Tom Reynolds, a spokesman for Mr. Richardson. “Measuring progress through body counts is wrong. Sixty-five percent of Iraqis support killing American soldiers. There is no national political progress. None. It can only happen when we send a clear signal we are leaving.”

Jeff Zeleny and Christine Hauser contributed reporting.

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