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IF ELECTED

Clinton Sees Some Troops Staying in Iraq if She Is Elected

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WASHINGTON, March 14 — Senator [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) foresees a “remaining military as well as political mission” in [Iraq](#), and says that if elected president, she would keep a reduced but significant military force there to fight [Al Qaeda](#), deter Iranian aggression, protect the Kurds and possibly support the Iraqi military.

In a half-hour interview on Tuesday in her Senate office, Mrs. Clinton said the scaled-down American military force that she would maintain in Iraq after taking office would stay off the streets in Baghdad and would no longer try to protect Iraqis from sectarian violence — even if it descended into ethnic cleansing.

In outlining how she would handle Iraq as commander in chief, Mrs. Clinton articulated a more-nuanced position than the one she has provided at her campaign events, where she has backed the goal of “bringing the troops home.”

She said in the interview that there were “remaining vital national security interests in Iraq” that would require a continuing deployment of American troops.

The United States’ security would be undermined if parts of Iraq turned into a failed state “that serves as a petri dish for insurgents and Al Qaeda,” she said. “It is right in the heart of the oil region. It is directly in opposition to our interests, to the interests of regimes, to Israel’s interests.”

“So I think it will be up to me to try to figure out how to protect those national security interests and continue to take our troops out of this urban warfare, which I think is a loser,” Mrs. Clinton added. She declined to estimate the number of American troops she would keep in Iraq, saying she would draw on the advice of the military officers who would have to carry out the strategy.

Mrs. Clinton’s plans carry some political risk. Although she has been extremely critical of the Bush administration’s handling of the war, some liberal Democrats are deeply suspicious of her intentions on Iraq, given that she voted in 2002 to authorize the use of force there and, unlike some of her rivals for the [Democratic nomination](#), has not apologized for having done so. Senator Clinton’s proposal is also likely to stir up debate among military specialists. Some counterinsurgency experts say the plan is unrealistic because Iraqis are unlikely to provide useful tips about Al Qaeda operatives if American troops curtail their interaction with the Iraqi public and end their efforts to protect Iraqi neighborhoods. But a former Pentagon official argued that such an approach would minimize American casualties and thus make it easier politically to sustain a long-term military presence that might prevent the fighting from spreading throughout the region.

Mrs. Clinton has said she would vote for a proposed Democratic resolution on Iraq now being debated on the floor of the Senate, which sets a goal of redeploying all combat forces by March 31, 2008. Asked if her Iraq plan was consistent with the resolution, Mrs. Clinton and her advisers said it was, noting that the resolution also called for “a limited number” of troops to stay in Iraq to protect the American Embassy and other personnel, train and equip Iraqi forces, and conduct “targeted counter-terrorism operation.”

With many Democratic primary voters favoring a total withdrawal from Iraq, Senator Clinton appears to be trying to balance her own short-term political interests with the need to retain some flexibility to deal with the complexities of Middle East. Like other Democratic candidates, she has called for engaging Iran and Syria in discussions and called on President Bush to reverse his troop buildup.

But while Mrs. Clinton has criticized Mr. Bush’s troop reinforcements as an escalation of war, she said in the interview, “We’re doing it and it’s unlikely we can stop it.”

“I’m going to root for it if it has any chance of success,” she said of the Bush plan, “but I think it’s more likely that the anti-American violence and sectarian violence just moves from place to place to place, like the old Whac a Mole. Clear some neighborhoods in Baghdad, then face Ramadi. Clear Ramadi, then maybe it’s back in Fallujah.”

Mrs. Clinton made it clear in the interview that she believes the next president is likely to face an Iraq that is still plagued by sectarian fighting and occupied by a sizable number of American troops. The likely problems, she said, include continued political disagreements in Baghdad, diehard Sunni insurgents, Al Qaeda operatives, Turkish anxiety over the Kurds and the effort to “prevent Iran from crossing the border and trying to have too much influence in Iraq.”

“The choices that one would face are neither good nor unlimited,” she said. “From the vantage point of where I sit now, I can tell you, in the absence of a very vigorous diplomatic effort on the political front and on the regional and international front, I think it is unlikely there will be a stable situation that’s inherited.”

On the campaign trail, Mrs. Clinton has repeatedly vowed to bring the war to a close if the fighting is still going on if she takes office as president. “If we in Congress don’t end this war before January 2009, as president, I will,” she has said.

In the interview, she suggested that it was likely that the fighting among the Iraqis would continue for some time. In broad terms, her strategy is to abandon the American military effort to stop the sectarian violence in Iraq and to focus instead on trying to prevent the strife from spreading throughout the region by shrinking and rearranging American troop deployments within Iraq.

The idea of repositioning American forces to minimize American casualties, discourage Iranian, Syrian and Turkish intervention and forestall the Kurds’ declaring independence is not a new one. It has been advocated by Dov S. Zakheim, who served as the Pentagon’s comptroller under former Defense Secretary [Donald H. Rumsfeld](#). Mr. Zakheim has estimated that no more than 75,000 troops would be required, compared with the approximately 160,000 troops the United States

will have in Iraq when the additional brigades in Mr. Bush's plan are deployed.

While Mrs. Clinton declined to estimate the size of a residual American troop presence, she indicated that they might be based north of Baghdad and in the western Anbar Province.

"It would be fewer troops," she said. "But what we can do is to almost take a line north of — between Baghdad and Kirkuk, and basically put our troops into that region the ones that are going to remain for our antiterrorism mission; for our northern support mission; for our ability to respond to the Iranians; and to continue to provide support, if called for, for the Iraqis."

Mrs. Clinton described a mission with serious constraints. "We would not be doing patrols," she added. "We would not be kicking in doors. We would not be trying to insert ourselves in the middle between the various Shiite and Sunni factions. I do not think that's a smart or achievable mission for American forces."

One question raised by counterinsurgency experts is whether the more limited military mission Mrs. Clinton is advocating would lead to a further major escalation in the sectarian fighting, because it would shift the entire burden for protecting Iraqis civilians to the nascent Iraqi Security Forces. A National Intelligence Estimate, which was issued in January, said the Iraqi forces would be hard-pressed to take on significantly increased responsibilities in the next 12 to 18 months. "Coalition capabilities, including force levels, resources and operations, remain an essential stabilizing element in Iraq," the estimate noted, referring to the American-led forces.

Mrs. Clinton said the intelligence estimate was based on a "faulty premise" because it did not take into account the sort of "phased deployment" plan she was advocating. But she acknowledged that under her strategy American troops would remain virtual bystanders if Shiites and Sunnis kill each other in sectarian attacks. "That may be inevitable," she said. "It certainly may be the only way to concentrate the attention of the parties."

Asked if Americans would endure having troops in Iraq who do nothing to stop sectarian attacks there, Mrs. Clinton replied, "Look, I think the American people are done with Iraq. I think they're at a point where, whether they thought it was a good idea or not, they have seen misjudgment and blunder after blunder, and their attitude is, what is this getting us? What is this doing for us?"

"No one wants to sit by and see mass killing," she added. "It's going on every day! Thousands of people are dying every month in Iraq. Our presence there is not stopping it. And there is no potential opportunity I can imagine where it could. This is an Iraqi problem — we cannot save the Iraqis from themselves. If we had a different attitude going in there, if we had stopped the looting immediately, if we had asserted our authority — you can go down the lines, if, if, if."

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