

Congressmen claim Iraqi pullout is coming

By [Global Research](#)

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Amid raucous debate in Congress about an exit strategy from Iraq, U.S. commanders on the ground have already launched plans to close bases and withdraw troops in the coming year, according to two congressmen who returned from Iraq this week.

"They wouldn't put a hard date on it, but clearly the planning is at a very mature level," Rep. John Kline, R-Minn., said. "We can shrink down the number of bases as we shrink down the number of Americans."

Rep. Mark Kennedy, R-Minn., who was with Kline in Iraq, said that in some places the turnover is already in progress. "They have a planned turnover process where American troops have already pulled back from some of the smaller bases."

The lawmakers' remarks are among the first indications that concrete steps are being taken to redeploy some of the 160,000 troops currently in Iraq. The Washington Post reported Wednesday that the Pentagon tentatively plans to reduce the number of U.S. forces in Iraq early next year by as many as three combat brigades, down from 18.

Kennedy and Kline's statements also echoed those of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who said in a televised interview that the United States probably will not need to maintain its current troop levels in Iraq much longer, though she backed off from any specific timetable.

"I do not think that American forces need to be there in the numbers that they are now because _ for very much longer _ because Iraqis are stepping up," she told Fox News.

Kline, a former Marine colonel, and Kennedy, a Republican Senate candidate in Minnesota, were part of a bipartisan delegation that left for the Middle East hours after a House vote Friday on a proposal by Rep. John Murtha, D-Pa., to begin an immediate troop withdrawal.

While that proposal was overwhelmingly defeated, Kline and Kennedy say a consensus is emerging among commanders on the ground that Iraqis forces are growing in their ability to take over a much greater part of the security burden.

Kennedy said he was told that the Dec. 15 national elections in Iraq will be guarded by 230,000 Iraqi troops, compared to 130,000 in last January's constitutional elections.

Responding to growing public dissatisfaction with the war, Democrats and Republicans in Congress are eager to see a downtick in the U.S. presence in Iraq, particularly as the 2006 congressional elections get closer.

A bipartisan group of lawmakers began lobbying House GOP leaders this week to adopt a Senate measure prodding the Bush administration to start bringing the troops home next year.

Still, some Pentagon commanders told members of the Senate Armed Services Committee that they need more manpower, not less, for the safety of the troops on the ground.

Kline and Kennedy, however, reported significant improvements in the security situation in Iraq, noting that they were able to stay overnight in Baghdad in an embassy in the Green Zone. In two previous trips, they were flown out of the country at night as a security precaution.

"Assuming the Dec. 15 elections go OK, which is critical, and assuming the continued development of the Iraqi security forces, which is going better than I anticipated, we expect a gradual, progressive reduction in American forces," Kennedy said. "This is not a reaction to protest, but to a deliberate plan of action."

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