

Requests to Build Big U.S. Bases in Iraq Raise Concern

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WASHINGTON — Even as military planners look to withdraw significant numbers of American troops from Iraq in the coming year, the Bush administration continues to request hundreds of millions of dollars for large bases there, raising concerns over whether they are intended as permanent homes for U.S. forces.

Questions on Capitol Hill about the future of the bases have been prompted by the new emergency spending bill for military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, which overwhelmingly passed the House of Representatives last week with \$67.6 billion in funding for the war effort, including the base money.

Although the House approved the measure, lawmakers are demanding the Pentagon explain its base plans and have unanimously passed a provision blocking the use of funds for basing agreements with the Iraqi government.

“It’s the kind of thing that incites terrorism,” said Rep. Ron Paul, R-Texas, of long-term or permanent U.S. bases in countries such as Iraq.

Paul, a critic of the war, is co-sponsoring a bipartisan bill that would make it official U.S. policy not to maintain such bases in Iraq. He noted that al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden cited U.S. military bases in Saudi Arabia as grounds for the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

The debate in Congress comes as concerns grow across the country over how long the U.S. intends to keep forces in Iraq, a worry amplified when President Bush earlier this week said that a complete withdrawal of troops from Iraq would not occur during his term.

The base intrigue also is problematic in the Middle East, where it lends credence to charges that the U.S. motive for the invasion was to seize Iraqi land and oil. It also feeds debate about the appropriate U.S. relationship with Iraq after the new government fully assumes control.

State Department and Pentagon officials have insisted the bases being constructed inside Iraq will eventually be handed over to the Iraqi government

Zalmay Khalilzad, the American ambassador to Baghdad, last week told Iraqi television that the U.S. has “no goal of establishing permanent bases in Iraq.”

Lt. Col. Barry Venable, a Pentagon spokesman, added: “We’re building permanent bases in Iraq for Iraqis.”

But the seemingly definitive administration statements mask a semantic distinction: while officials say they are not building permanent bases, they decline to say whether they will seek a deal with the new Iraqi government allowing long-term troop deployments.

Asked at a congressional hearing last week whether he could “make an unequivocal commitment” that the U.S. officials would not seek to establish permanent bases in Iraq, Army Gen. John Abizaid, the officer in charge of all U.S. forces in the Middle East and Central Asia replied: “The policy on long-term presence in Iraq hasn’t been formulated.” Venable, the Pentagon spokesman, said it was “premature and speculative” to discuss a long-term basing agreement before the permanent Iraqi government has been put in place.

All told, the United States has set up 110 forward operating bases in Iraq, and the Pentagon says about 34 of them already have been turned over to the Iraqi government, part of an ongoing effort to gradually strengthen Iraqi security forces.

Bush is under political pressure to reduce the number of U.S. troops before the fall mid-term congressional elections, and the Pentagon is expected to decide soon whether the next major deployment will reflect a significant reduction.

But despite the potential force reductions and the base handovers, the spending has continued.

Dov Zakheim, who oversaw the Pentagon’s emergency spending requests as the department’s budget chief until 2004, said critics may be reading too much into the costly emergency spending, needed to protect U.S. forces from insurgent attacks or provide better conditions for deployed troops.

“That doesn’t necessarily connote permanence,” Zakheim said. “God knows it’s a tough enough environment anyway.”

The bulk of the Pentagon’s emergency military construction spending over the last three years inside Iraq has focused on three or four large-scale air and logistics bases that dot central Iraq.

The administration is seeking \$348 million in base construction money as part of its 2006 emergency war funding bill. The Senate has not yet acted on the request.

By far the most funding has gone to a mammoth facility just north of Baghdad in Balad, which includes an air base and the Anaconda logistical center. The U.S. Central Command has said it intends to use the base as the military’s primary hub in the region as it gradually hands off Baghdad International Airport to civilian authorities.

Through the end last year, the Bush administration spent about \$230 million in emergency funds on the Balad base, and its new request includes another \$17.8 million for new roads to handle hulking military vehicles and a 12.4-mile, 13-foot high security fence.

The nonpartisan Congressional Research Service noted in a report last year that many of the funds already spent, including facilities at Balad, suggest a longer term U.S. presence.

Projects there include an \$18 million aircraft parking ramp and \$15 million airfield lighting system that has allowed commanders to make Balad a strategic air center for the region; a

\$2.9 million Special Operations compound, isolated from the rest of the base and complete with landing pads for helicopters and airplanes, where classified payloads can be delivered; and a \$7 million mail distribution building.

Other bases also are being developed in ways that lend them to permanent use.

This year's request also includes \$110 million for Tallil Air Base outside the southeastern city of Nasiriya, a sprawling facility in the shadow of the ruins of the biblical city of Ur. Only \$11 million has been spent so far, but the administration's new request appears to envision Tallil emerging as another major transport hub, with new roads, a new dining hall for 6,000 troops — about two Army brigades — and a new center to organize and support large supply convoys.

The administration also has spent \$50 million for Camp Taji, an army base north of Baghdad, and \$46.3 million on Al Asad Air Base, an airfield in the western desert.

These large bases are being built at the same time hundreds of millions of dollars are being spent on separate bases for the growing Iraqi military. According to the U.S. Central Command and data obtained from the Army Corps of Engineers, for example, about \$165 million has been spent to build an Iraqi base near the southern town of Numaniya and more than \$150 million for a northern base at the old Iraqi army's Al Kasik facility.

The big numbers have begun to cause consternation in congressional appropriations committees, which are demanding more accountability from Pentagon officials on military construction in the region.

The House Appropriations Committee approved the president's newest funding bill earlier this month with a strongly-worded warning. In a report accompanying the legislation, the committee noted it has already approved about \$1.3 billion in emergency spending for war-related construction, but that the recently declared "long war" on terrorism should allow more oversight of basing plans in the region.

"(I)t has become clear in recent years that these expeditionary operations can result in substantial military construction expenditures of a magnitude normally associated with permanent bases," the committee reported.

Rep. James Walsh, R-N.Y., chairman of the House subcommittee that oversees military construction, said his panel is concerned that money the Pentagon is seeking ostensibly for short-term, emergency needs actually are going to projects that are not urgent but instead are more long-term in nature.

Walsh pointed to a \$167 million request to build a series of roads in Iraq that bypass major cities, a proposal the administration said is needed to decrease convoys' exposure to roadside bombs, known as improvised explosive devices, or IEDs. Walsh's subcommittee cut the budget for the project to \$60 million. He said the project sounded more like "more like road construction" than it did a strategy to protect troops from IEDs.

The Appropriations Committee also inserted a ban on spending any of the new money on facilities in Iraq until the U.S. Central Command submitted a "master plan" for bases in the region. Abizaid, in his congressional testimony last week, said such a plan was in the process of getting final Pentagon approval for release to the committee. But he noted: "The master plan is fairly clear on everything except for Iraq and Afghanistan, which I don't have

policy guidance for long-term.”

Without such detail, it may prove impossible for congressional appropriators to get a firm idea on how the Bush administration views the future of the U.S. presence on big Iraqi bases.

In any event, said Zakheim, the former Pentagon budget officer, projects that expand bases’ ability to handle American cargo and warplanes will eventually be of use to the Iraqi government.

“Just because the Iraqis don’t have an air force now doesn’t mean they won’t have it several years down the road,” Zackheim said.

But critics said it is all the more reason for the administration to stop being vague about the future.

“The Iraqis believe we came for their oil and we’re going to put bases on top of their oil,” said Rep. Thomas Allen, D-Maine, a critic of the administration’s approach. “As long as the vast majority of Iraqis believe we want to be there indefinitely, those who are opposed to us are going to fight harder and those who are with us are going to be less enthusiastic.”

Times staff writer Doug Smith contributed to this report.

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