Some in Congress Talk of Iraq Withdrawal

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WASHINGTON (AP) - Talk of withdrawing U.S. troops from Iraq is simmering on Capitol Hill. It's mostly from Democrats - Edward Kennedy on Thursday became the first senator to say "we must begin" withdrawal - but Republicans, too, expect the discussion to increase as an Iraqi government takes shape and Congress considers more billions of dollars for the war.

President Bush won't set a timetable and Iraq's interim prime minister, Ayad Allawi, says it's too soon to talk about American forces leaving.

Indeed, just days before Iraqis vote for a national assembly, many in Congress are reluctant to even talk about a plan for withdrawal because there are so many uncertainties.

Still, both Republicans and Democrats recognize they will be under increasing pressure to answer the question of when American forces will return home. Polls show the public growing skeptical about the war - no matter the outcome of Sunday's election.

After the swift fall of Baghdad in April 2003, the military expected troop withdrawal to begin within weeks. But then insurgents rose up and created deadly pockets of resistance. Now, some 150,000 American troops remain in Iraq and U.S. deaths have surpassed 1,400.

Democratic Rep. Lynn Woolsey of California, a longtime critic of the president's Iraq policies, introduced a House resolution this week calling for the president to withdraw U.S. troops immediately. "We've gone as far as we can with this and we're sacrificing our troops every day," Woolsey said.

The resolution has the support of 24 other House Democrats, and Woolsey wants the debate to reach the House floor. Recently, she and 15 other House Democrats sent the president letters imploring him to bring home troops immediately.

This week, others joined in the drumbeat.

"A political process has begun, admittedly fragile, and it's time for the United States to leave," Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-Ill., declared.

Rep. Marty Meehan, D-Mass., called for a more gradual pullback, with the majority of American forces returning home in phases by the end of the year. "A timetable for withdrawal would be that light at the end of the tunnel for our military," Meehan said.

On Thursday, Kennedy argued that the U.S. military must start leaving Iraq because its "indefinite presence is fanning the flames of conflict."

"It will not be easy to extricate ourselves from Iraq, but we must begin," he said.

Senate Republicans, meanwhile, say it's not the right time even to talk of pulling out, let alone do it. They stick to the party line that the United States can't consider withdrawing until an Iraqi security force is able to protect the fledgling democratic government on its own.

Yet, it's clear that they, too, are growing frustrated with a war that has no end in sight.

"We need reduce our presence as quickly as we can. There may be a time when we can begin a tentative timetable, but if we set a firm deadline now the bad guys will just wait to attack until we start pulling out troops out," said Sen. Jeff Sessions of Alabama.

Added Sen. Pat Roberts of Kansas: "Everybody hopes the sooner the better. I wish it would happen tomorrow, but that's just not feasible right now."

Meanwhile, Sen. John McCain of Arizona said the focus should be on reducing U.S. casualties. "The problem is American troops are getting killed and wounded every day," he said.

A few House Republicans have tried to start a dialogue about a timetable.

"I want to avoid the possibility of having our troops over there for the next 50 years," said Rep. Howard Coble of North Carolina, who backed the president's pre-emptive attack on Iraq.

Rep. Jim Leach of Iowa, one of the six House Republicans who voted against giving Bush the authority to use force in Iraq, said a plan for disengaging troops from combat - and then pulling them out altogether - "needs to be looked at as a serious option" after the election.

"Just as it is clear we cannot precipitously withdraw," Leach said, "it's also clear you cannot maintain a troop presence ad infinitum."