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Iraq still key issue in presidential race

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The Iraq war continues to provide political munitions for the three leading presidential candidates, despite limited options facing the war's inheritor and an eclipsing global economic crisis.

In a confluence of recent war-themed events set against roiling financial markets, [Sen. John McCain](#) landed in Iraq on a "fact-finding" mission this weekend, and Sen. [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) yesterday detailed her most comprehensive plan yet to end the war.

McCain, a Republican who supports nothing short of victory in Iraq and has assailed the "cut-and-run" proposals of his Democratic rivals, was among the strongest backers of last year's troop surge, which by some estimates has reduced violence in Iraq by 60 percent.

He's been excoriated by Clinton for a stance that assumes an American presence in Iraq for up to 100 years, though he has clarified that to mean a presence similar to that of U.S. troops in postwar Germany and Korea.

The economy matters

Still, with evidence that voters are more focused on the economy, McCain's unabashed support for the war could face challenges. A USA Today/Gallup Poll released last week found only 40 percent of Americans support a continued presence in Iraq, while 60 percent view the war as a mistake but differ on timetables for withdrawal.

"This could very well prove to be the worst of all worlds for McCain," said University of [Pennsylvania](#) political science professor Donald Kettl, who is director of the Fels Institute of Government. "He appears to be trying to make the case that Iraq is an [overarching] issue in the race. ... Is it risky? Absolutely."

The Democratic candidates, Clinton and Sen. [Barack Obama](#), both support troop withdrawals from Iraq beginning between 60 days and 16 months, respectively, from the day they take office. Clinton has

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sought to differentiate her position by lambasting Obama for a supposed lack of commander-in-chief readiness and conflicts between his stated withdrawal plan and a less-forceful pullout voiced by his now-resigned top foreign policy adviser Samantha Power.

Obama, who voted against the Iraq war resolution in a widely praised October 2002 speech, has criticized Clinton for voting for the resolution.

Observers say the fine line between the Clinton-Obama plan for withdrawal essentially reduces the Democratic position to a vote for ending the war.

David [Michael Green](#), a political-science professor at [Hofstra University](#) and an expert on politics and the Iraq war, likened Clinton's criticism of Obama's war withdrawal plans to "her attempts to parse the health care issue when, in fact, the two plans are very similar." The Democratic contest could be decided on who is more charismatic, a contest likely to be decided in Obama's favor, Green said, adding he believes Obama would do better in a race against McCain.

Clinton, in her speech at [George Washington University](#) yesterday, as elsewhere, has worked to tie a continued Iraq presence to economic woes, a strategy with some resonance in the face of \$4 gasoline and the recent estimate by Nobel laureate economist Joseph Stiglitz that the eventual economic cost will be \$3 trillion.

Iraq not going away

But not everyone believes the war will take a backseat in the election. Peter Feaver, a Duke University political science professor, said an Obama-McCain contest would move it front and center. "I think it's going to play a bigger role than it appeared last week in terms of its salience," he said, because Obama's national security resume is light compared to McCain's.

And for all their troop withdrawal bluster, Feaver said, both Democratic candidates have left themselves the option of slowing or forestalling a pullout.

"If you parse the words closely, she's leaving herself wiggle room," Feaver said of Clinton. For instance, "You can start it [withdrawal], but you don't have to finish it."

As for McCain, Feaver advised, "He has to be clearer in responding to the false charge of wanting a surge for 100 years."

Then again, trying to force Iraq to the fore may carry risks, particularly this week, said Kettl of the University of Pennsylvania. "The last thing you need is to have major Wall Street firms going crazy and he's off talking about last year's issue," he said.

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