

Bush sees support ebb away for military strategy in Iraq

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Support for George W. Bush's strategy of "staying the course" in Iraq appears to be crumbling, with a growing number of fellow Republicans and senior military figures questioning how long the US can sustain its presence.

The US president got a jolting reminder of the deteriorating situation when the Mahdi army of hardline Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr took control of the southern city of Amara. The putsch raised more questions over the stability of Iraq's coalition government under Nouri al-Maliki, who is nominally supported by the Sadrist group that carried it out.

It follows some of the worst violence in Iraq since the US-led invasion, with more than 100 civilian deaths a day over the past three weeks and more than 70 US military casualties. Major General William Caldwell, US military spokesman in Baghdad, acknowledged on Thursday that the strategy of "clear and hold" in Baghdad was failing.

Mr Bush conceded yesterday that he was increasingly flexible about America's military strategy. In the past few weeks he has abandoned talk of achieving "victory" in Iraq - previously a stock-in-trade of presidential announcements. "We are constantly adjusting tactics so we can achieve our objectives," Mr Bush said. "And right now, it's tough."

Domestic pressure on him is mounting ahead of a widely predicted Republican defeat in the November 7 mid-term elections.

"We are now way past the tipping point on the ground in Iraq," said Gary Samore at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York. "But it is doubtful there will be any change of course until we see the results of the mid-term elections."

Mr Bush's difficulties have been exacerbated by growing dissent within his own party, with Republican congressional candidates distancing themselves from Washington's "stay the course" line. In what analysts see as a sign of growing desperation, some even support a widely-distrusted plan to partition Iraq into separate Kurdish, Shia and Sunni entities.

Attention is increasingly focused on the Iraq Study Group, an independent body led by James Baker, the former secretary of state, and Lee Hamilton, a former Democratic lawmaker, which is expected to recommend a drastic change of course. Some think it could lead to the departure of Donald Rumsfeld, defence secretary, soon after the polls.

"A lot rides on the outcome of the elections," an ISG member in Washington said last night. "If the Democrats win, the pressure on Mr Bush to start drawing down the troops could be overwhelming. If the Republicans retain control of Congress, then you could see more US troops sent there in a last-ditch effort to stabilise the violence."

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