

## Iraq's best chance

January's elections were an important first step toward democracy, but Iraqis still have little oversight over U.S. operations, which affect Iraqi security, natural resources, reconstruction, and the economy. The elections appear to have deepened Iraq's sectarian divisions between the Shia, Sunnis, and Kurds. These divisions stalled the formation of the government and are slowing the writing of a new constitution. Politicians who are seen as collaborating with the U.S. increasingly are targeted by insurgents.

Having Iraqis in charge of their own security is a goal that the Bush administration and the peace movement can agree upon. But that can only happen in a truly sovereign nation. The police and military forces the U.S. is trying to create in Iraq have failed to provide security for the Iraqi people because they are fighting in a war that puts anyone associated with the U.S. occupation at great risk.

At the same time, soldiers and police officers lack training, and with unemployment in Iraq ranging between 30 and 70 percent, many Iraqi soldiers are loyal only to the paycheck they receive. More importantly, Iraqi security forces cannot succeed as long as the U.S. is leading a war on the ground in Iraq, as it is unclear who the security forces are fighting for—the U.S. or a nascent Iraqi government with no real power or popular support.

What will happen when U.S. troops are withdrawn? No one can say with any certainty. But it is certain that if Washington continues to "stay the course," U.S. troops will continue to die, and they will continue to kill. And Iraq's reconstruction will remain stalled.

It is likely that the withdrawal of U.S. troops would lead to the collapse of at least some parts of the current government, but some of its institutions—including the police, the military, and other security agencies—could survive under new leadership untainted by association with the U.S. occupation.

Without an outside enemy occupying the country, it is also possible that the kind of secular nationalism long dominant in Iraq would again prevail as the most influential political force in the emerging Iraqi polity, replacing the fundamentalist tendencies currently on the rise among Iraqis facing the desperation of occupation, repression, and growing impoverishment.

It is unlikely that the violence will completely disappear with the end of the occupation, or that the Iraqi military can rebuild itself instantly after

U.S. troops are withdrawn. As a result, there should be plans for providing temporary peacekeeping or security assistance if Iraq requests it.

Temporary on-the-ground security assistance cannot be imposed by U.S. (or U.S.-led coalition) forces. Nor can an international peace force function safely if it is perceived as colluding with an occupying force.

Only a truly multilateral force can be credible to the Iraqi people. For example, a combination of United Nations blue-helmet peacekeepers and temporary forces accountable to the Arab League and/or the Organization of the Islamic Conference could provide international legitimacy as well as regional accountability. The effect would be to reduce regional tensions and encourage neighboring countries to provide support throughout Iraq's reconstruction process.

## A plan for withdrawal

Once a date for troop withdrawal has been announced, the following steps can facilitate phasing out U.S. involvement and building peace and reconstruction:

1. **Reduce number of U.S. troops and end offensive operations.** As a first step to withdrawal, the U.S. should declare an immediate cease-fire and reduce the number of troops deployed in Iraq. Continuing offensive operations will only escalate the violence and make Iraq less secure and less safe. The U.S. should pull troops out of major cities and shift troop strength to guarding the borders to stem the flow of foreign fighters and money used to fund the resistance. If Iraqi security forces need help maintaining order, they can invite in outside forces.
2. **Declare that the U.S. will not maintain a permanent military presence in Iraq.** Congress needs to affirm its commitment to a responsible withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Iraq. A congressional resolution clarifying that the U.S. has no plan to control Iraq's oil, to establish permanent military bases in Iraq, or to suppress Muslims, would deprive insurgents of their central organizing message. Without such a resolution, Iraqis will assume that the U.S. intends to make the occupation a permanent feature of Iraqi life.
3. **Hand over the restoration of services to Iraqis.** The U.S. government and its contractors have

failed to restore public safety, public services, strengthen institutions, or provide jobs. By giving Iraqis control over reconstruction funds, more Iraqis will get jobs and projects will be better targeted to the needs of Iraqis. Lowering the unemployment rate will weaken insurgency recruitment efforts.

4. **Put the brakes on fraud, waste, and abuse.** Lawmakers should clamp down on the rampant war profiteering that has caused widespread waste, fraud, and abuse. To do this, the U.S. must stop awarding no-bid contracts and open-ended, "cost-plus," multi-billion dollar contracts such as those awarded to Halliburton and Bechtel, and increase oversight over the military and its contractors.
5. **Make reparations.** The United States owes a massive financial debt to Iraq. Over time, the obligation must be honored to repay Iraq for the collapse of their economy as a result of the economic sanctions of 1990-2003 and for the damage of the 2003-2005 invasion and occupation. The United States must also follow through on promises of reconstruction funds, beyond the small amount so far released.

6. **Enter into negotiations.** As with any guerrilla war, the Iraqi resistance is unlikely to be defeated by military means. Political and diplomatic solutions are the keys to ending the violence. Recent news reports indicate that some discussion between insurgent groups and the U.S. military have occurred. But even more important than negotiations with the U.S. is a dialogue between the insurgents and newly elected Iraqi leaders.

### Looking Forward

All scenarios in today's war-ravaged Iraq are risky. Maintaining the U.S. occupation in Iraq, with U.S. troops killing and dying in Iraq, violates U.S. and international law, the U.N. Charter, and the Geneva Conventions. Clearly this is not the way forward.

A January 2005 Zogby poll found that 82 percent of Sunnis and 69 percent of Shiites favor U.S. withdrawal either immediately or after an elected government is in place. How withdrawal is accomplished will be our legacy. What we propose is that that legacy be based on giving the Iraqis true control over their political, economic, and military conditions.

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A San Francisco girl sits among boots memorializing each U.S. soldier that has been killed in the Iraq war. The boots are part of the Eyes Wide Open exhibit of the American Friends Service Committee



Justin Sullivan