

# A New Course in Iraq

By Erik Leaver | December 10, 2004

As many members of Congress and President George W. Bush's administration argue that it's unacceptable to leave Iraq as a failed state, it becomes clearer every day that U.S. operations and policies are fueling violence and instability. It's time for the government to directly confront the question of how to fulfill U.S. obligations under international law, restore basic security, and responsibly withdraw U.S. forces.

Central to this point, Washington must not simply abandon the Iraqi people to the chaos it has created. But the U.S. needs to accept the fact that continued military occupation by the U.S. will only cause more casualties, foster division in the country, and keep reconstruction from advancing.

In the six months since the transition to Iraqi sovereignty officially got underway on June 28, 2004, the human cost of the U.S. occupation of that country has risen dramatically. U.S. military deaths have topped 1,200. A study published in *The Lancet* has estimated that 100,000 Iraqis have died as a result of war and conditions under occupation. Norwegian researchers, the United Nations, and the Iraqi government recently reported that malnutrition among the youngest children in Iraq has nearly doubled since the U.S.-led invasion of that country. And soaring rates of disease and a crippled health system are threatening to kill more than have died in the aftermath of the war.

This dynamic is unlikely to change in the near term. The Bush administration's stated two-pronged plan of staging elections and putting Iraqis in charge of their own security is clearly the right objective. But on the ground this is failing for a variety of reasons. Iraqi elections held under U.S. military occupation and under election rules written by the U.S. will lack legitimacy both inside and outside Iraq. Furthermore, the lack of UN election experts on the ground, coupled with continued fighting, and the fact that any polling location guarded by U.S. troops will be a military target, means free and fair elections can't take place as scheduled in January.

Iraqis need to be in charge of their own security. But the Iraqi police and National Guard have largely failed to provide security for the Iraqi people and the situation appears to be only worsening. Iraq's security forces are fighting in a war that puts anyone who is physically near or associated with the U.S. occupation at risk. At the same time, soldiers and police officers lack adequate training. One measure of the problem can be seen in their death toll. Over 1,500 Iraqi security force recruits and 750 Iraqi police officers have been killed. Iraqi security forces can't succeed as long as the U.S. is leading a war on the ground in Iraq.

As Larry Diamond, who worked as a senior adviser to the Coalition Provisional Authority, has noted, "There are really no good options," at this point. But there are better options than the policies being currently pursued. The following five steps would lessen the violence and insecurity in Iraq:

## 1) Decrease 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. Instead, the Bush administration has done the opposite, increasing the number of troops stationed there by 12,000. Increased 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 so that greater manpower can be directed to guarding the borders to stem the flow of foreign fighters and money being used to fund the resistance. If Iraqi security forces need assistance maintaining order, they have the option of inviting in regional forces, as proposed by Saudi Arabia. They could also reinstate the former Iraqi army, which was well-trained, after purging upper-level Saddam supporters and providing additional counterinsurgency training to deal with the current war. Once implemented, these measures would allow for total withdrawal of U.S. forces.

## 2) Declare that the U.S. has no intention to maintain a permanent or long-term military presence or bases in Iraq.

Congress needs to make clear that it is committed to the principle of responsible withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Iraq. By making this statement through a congressional resolution, the U.S. would openly acknowledge that it has no interest in controlling Middle Eastern oil or in suppressing Muslims, hence depriving insurgents of their central organizing message. Without such a resolution, Iraqis have little reason to believe that our present actions are nothing greater than a plan to establish a long-term military presence in Iraq and make the occupation a permanent feature of Iraqi life.

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3) **Do more to restore services:** Moving control of reconstruction from the Defense Department to the State Department has been a positive step as it removes an agency designed to fight war from the much different task of nation building. But a much stronger statement to the Iraqi people would be to go even further and give Iraqis direct authority over reconstruction funding. The U.S. government and its contractors have failed to restore public services and public safety, strengthen institutions, or provide jobs. Meanwhile, billions of appropriated dollars remain unspent. By giving Iraqis control over reconstruction funds more Iraqis will get jobs and projects will be better targeted to the needs of Iraqis. And lowering the unemployment rate will weaken the potential for recruitment into the insurgency.

4) **Postpone national elections and hold elections for provincial governments:** Given that war is raging in most of Iraq's Sunni regions, prospects for free and fair elections in January are dim. Given the reality on the ground, the U.S. should call for a delay of national elections while helping Iraqis hold elections for local governments. Local governments should be given the power so far denied to Iraqis. They need budget oversight and dedicated funding derived from the country's oil exports. Additionally, they need the authority to work with Iraqi ministries to assess local needs, decide which reconstruction efforts should get priority, and deliver services. They would also have an oversight role for expenditures. Once provincial elections are completed, illustrating that the U.S. is willing to cede power, and a guarantee that Sunnis will be included in

the political process is in place, national elections will become more viable.

5) **Impose conditions on U.S. spending for the Iraq War:** To date the U.S. has spent \$151 billion on the Iraq War. It's important to support the troops, but a recent exchange between Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and the troops illustrated the safety of the troops has not been Washington's primary concern. Congress should exercise its prerogative in shaping U.S. policy in Iraq by tying a forthcoming supplemental spending bill now rumored to be between \$70-100 billion to the previous four points. At the same time, lawmakers should put the brakes 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. Finally, the U.S. should cancel previously awarded contracts to companies whose workforces don't have a majority of Iraqis.

The current U.S. approach in Iraq is too costly in human and financial terms to Americans at home, our troops abroad, and to the very people this war was supposed to liberate. More importantly, it isn't improving Iraq's stability or security. These five steps represent an ambitious new direction for the United States and for the Iraqi people.

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