

# A Negotiated Settlement in Iraq

By Gareth Porter | March 11, 2005

It is now time for the United States to pursue the one policy option that has been missing from the national discussion of Iraq: the negotiation of a peace settlement with the insurgents that would involve the complete withdrawal of U.S. troops in return for the surrender of the insurgents and the reintegration of the Sunni region into the post-Saddam political system.

In recent weeks there have been multiple indications that some insurgent leaders as well as some in the election-winning United Iraqi Alliance are actively interested in such a settlement. *TIME* revealed that certain insurgent leaders had met with U.S. diplomats and intelligence officers about a settlement under which they would surrender.<sup>1</sup>

Then former U.S. client and member of the United Iraqi Alliance, Ahmed Chalabi, told *Agence-France Presse* on March 3 that he had been meeting with the Muslim Scholars Association, which is known to have contacts with the insurgents, about “cooperating together to end the foreign presence in Iraq so [the insurgents] do not feel they have to fight to defend the country against foreign occupation.”<sup>2</sup> Just a day before that, a member of the Muslim Scholars Association had informed Xinhua news agency that they had held “clandestine negotiations with the leaders of the Iraqi resistance on a possible ceasefire in the Anbar province.”<sup>3</sup>

The Bush administration has long discouraged any thought about negotiations, portraying the Iraqi insurgency as a terrorist alliance between the foreign jihadists aligned with Osama Bin Laden and high-ranking Ba’athist security officials who seek to restore Saddam’s regime. That propaganda line misrepresents the actual composition and leadership of the insurgency. High ranking officers of Saddam’s elite security services did start the insurgency, and some of them may still harbor the dream of recreating the old regime. But the insurgency quickly evolved into something quite different.

During the last half of 2003, tens of thousands of young men, most of them former soldiers in the dis-

banded Iraqi army who could not get a job, joined the insurgency, not out of loyalty to Saddam but to drive out the occupation forces and to avenge the killing or mistreatment of family members or friends in U.S. “cordon and search” operations. By early 2004, the original Saddamist “Party of Return” was only one of more than 35 insurgent operations in Iraq.

Many of the local leaders of insurgent groups are clearly not Saddam loyalists but former mid-level officers from the security services, as noted recently by an adviser to the Pentagon on Iraq in *The Washington Post*.<sup>4</sup> These young Ba’athists and the Sunni clerics who joined the resistance in 2004 are the insurgent leaders who are likely to be most interested in a peace settlement.

Given the decentralized nature of the insurgency, some leaders would undoubtedly refuse to participate in the agreement at first. However, if the agreement called for a phased series of mutual cease-fire agreements starting in cities in the Sunni triangle, followed quickly by almost simultaneous insurgent demobilization and U.S. withdrawal, the successful implementation of the first U.S. withdrawal would certainly bring about a dramatic change in the political climate in Sunni areas. Especially if those who surrendered were honored locally for their role in achieving that withdrawal, the pressures on initial holdouts to participate in the process could quickly become irresistible, except for the small hard core of Saddamists whose participation in Saddam’s crimes would make them ineligible for amnesty.

The hundreds of foreign terrorists in Iraq would not profit from such a settlement. They have been able to avoid capture only because they have been tolerated by

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the predominantly secular leadership of the Sunni insurgents. But that dynamic could easily change if a peace agreement were negotiated ending the U.S. and coalition occupation.

The foreign jihadists' fanatically anti-Shiite brand of Islam and some of their tactics, such as kidnappings and executions of hostages and terror bombings of Shiite worshippers, have created serious conflict between them and nationalist leaders of the anti-occupation forces, including those who are Sunni clerics. There have been numerous indications over the past year that the nationalist leaders would like to be rid of the foreign jihadists once the Americans have withdrawn. If peace negotiations were to begin, therefore, it is likely that the foreign terrorists would start packing their bags, knowing that the shelter they have had in the Sunni areas would disappear.

Despite the fact that such a peace accord would serve the interests of both Iraqis and Americans, there is a serious danger that the Bush administration will not support negotiations, much less initiate them. Last July, Interim Prime Minister Ayad Allawi declared through his spokesman his desire to offer a general amnesty for any insurgents who would surrender. U.S. Ambassador John Negroponte insisted, however, that insurgents who killed Americans should not be amnestied, and Allawi dropped his plan.

The evidence thus far suggests that the meetings between U.S. officers and insurgent leaders were only to explore the possibility of splitting them off from the rest of the insurgency without ending the occupation. Deeper negotiations are unlikely as the Bush administration may have an ulterior motive for seeking to avert

a negotiated settlement of the war. Such a settlement would eliminate the main leverage Washington has on a Shiite-dominated regime in Iraq—its dependence on the U.S. military presence. Once the Sunni insurgency is no longer the main problem facing Iraq, it can be expected that a conflict would soon emerge between U.S. regional strategy and a Shiite leadership that is determined to maintain close relations with Iran.

If the opportunity for peace is lost because Bush spurns negotiations, everyone will lose except for the foreign Islamic terrorists in Iraq. If the war continues, they will have been given a virtual guarantee that they can continue using Iraq to recruit and train terrorists for an indefinite period. The time to try peace diplomacy is now, not many months or years from now, after thousand or tens of thousands more have died needlessly.

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#### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> "Talking with the Enemy," by Michael Ware, *TIME*, Feb. 28, 2005  
<http://www.time.com/time/archive/preview/0,10987,1029805,00.html>
- <sup>2</sup> "Political Survivor Chalabi Reaches Out to Iraq Insurgents," by Jill Carroll, *Agence France-Presse*, March 3, 2005  
<http://www.globalpolicy.org/security/issues/iraq/resist/2005/0303chalabi.htm>
- <sup>3</sup> "Leading Iraqi Sunni Clerics Broker Peace Deal Between Insurgents, US Forces," [www.chinaview.cn](http://www.chinaview.cn), March 2, 2005  
[http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2005-03/02/content\\_2640017.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2005-03/02/content_2640017.htm)
- <sup>4</sup> "But What About the Sunnis?" by Gary Anderson, *The Washington Post*, February 3, 2005  
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A59183-2005Feb2.html>

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