

How to Bring the Troops Home and Internationalize the Peace

By Phyllis Bennis and Erik Leaver | Institute for Policy Studies | January 12, 2005

*“There is an old military doctrine called the First Rule of Holes: If you find yourself stuck in one, stop digging.”
—the late Rear Admiral Eugene Carroll, U.S. Navy (Ret.)*

Those who advocate “staying the course” or “internationalizing the war” are too busy digging deeper. A real solution to the Iraq War must start with ending the U.S. occupation. Then, and only then, we can talk about internationalizing the peace.

But this raises serious questions. How should the occupation end and the peace be internationalized? Even if the war is wrong, will it make things worse if the U.S. pulls out? Having invaded and occupied Iraq, what are our responsibilities to the Iraqi people? How can the chances for civil war be minimized? Bennis and Leaver offer steps that follow progressive principles while offering realistic steps to help put the U.S. back on the side of the rule of law, and gives the people of Iraq the best chance of rebuilding their devastated country and moving toward peace, justice, and security.

The U.S. in Iraq: Two Years of War

The Iraq War has, like the Vietnam War of a generation ago, sorely divided the people of the United States. The invasion, occupation, and continuing war have brought about the death of over 1,300 young women and men serving in the U.S. military. Over 10,000 have been seriously injured. Thousands are returning home with grievous mental and emotional damage. Civil rights, particularly those of Arab immigrants and Arab-Americans, have been shredded. The \$151 billion in U.S. tax dollars spent on the war, not to mention the \$100 billion more Congress will soon be asked to allocate, has wrought havoc on the economy and dramatically escalated the deficit.

Iraqis have suffered far more. Their country has been shattered by military assaults, and continues to languish under a violent occupation and brutal war. Cities such as Fallujah have been virtually destroyed by U.S. military forces claiming to “liberate” the now-deserted city of 300,000. The ruin of Fallujah, and so much of Iraq, by U.S. forces recalls the words of the great writer Tacitus, who followed Rome’s

legionnaires as they laid waste to the empire’s far-flung cities. “The Romans brought devastation,” he wrote, “and they called it peace.”

Despite the June 2004 so-called “transfer of authority” to the Iraqi interim government, the U.S. military occupation and political representatives remain in control of Iraq’s people, economy, social, and political systems. According to U.S. researchers, over 100,000 Iraqi civilians have perished as a result of the occupation and war. The British-based Iraqi Body Count has confirmed 15,000-17,400 specific civilian deaths caused by military violence. The January 30 elections, if they take place, will not change these realities.

Fighting a war launched in defiance of the United Nations and in violation of international law as well as the U.S. Constitution, the U.S. and coalition forces are engaged in a pattern of lawlessness that violates both U.S. and international law. U.S. officials and many Americans brag of the U.S. being a great democracy, living under the rule of law with a government accountable to the will of its people. If that

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is true, citizens are liable for the U.S. government's actions.

Around the world the vast majority of people and governments stand opposed to this war. In the U.S., a majority of people, and increasing numbers of political and military leaders, believe the war was wrong from the beginning or is not worth the price. But many are uncertain what to do. Even if the war is wrong, will it make things worse if the U.S. pulls out? Having invaded and occupied Iraq, what are our responsibilities to the Iraqi people?

Ending the U.S. Occupation of Iraq Is the Only Solution to This Escalating Crisis

Ending the U.S. occupation of Iraq means bringing the U.S. troops home. All of them. Immediately. U.S. troops are the primary cause of the violence in Iraq and not the solution to the violence. The nearly 150,000 U.S. troops currently in Iraq should be out of the country and on their way home by July 4, 2005—allowing Iraq to celebrate its own independence.

The Iraqi resistance has grown larger, stronger, and more popular in the past two years in response to the U.S. invasion and occupation. In November 2003 the Pentagon estimated that there were about 5,000 Iraqi resistance fighters. By December 2004 the Iraqi “interim government” estimated that the number had grown to approximately 40,000 active military forces and 200,000 supporters in the resistance.

The continuing presence of the U.S. troops has strengthened, not weakened, the resistance. Resistance attacks are killing far more Iraqi civilians than U.S. troops, but the target of almost all the attacks remains institutions and individuals associated with—and thus viewed as collaborating with—the U.S. occupation forces. They include police officers, other security forces, officials of the U.S.-backed interim government, translators, and civilian employees of the U.S. and “coalition” militaries.

With the withdrawal of the occupation forces and the resulting end of the Iraqi structures supporting them, the major target for resistance attacks will disappear. The current deployments in Iraq include

150,000 U.S. troops, about 30,000 “coalition” troops from often reluctant U.S. allies, and 20,000 U.S. military contractors. The pattern is clear: adding more troops sparks greater resistance, not less.

Just as the resistance and U.S. troop levels have increased, so has the casualty toll. In the first three months following last June's so-called “hand-over” of authority to the U.S.-installed interim Iraqi government, the number of U.S. military casualties skyrocketed, from 449 to 747 each month. And Iraqi civilians continue to die in huge numbers. Johns Hopkins University researchers published a study in the British medical journal *The Lancet* indicating that by October 2004 more than 100,000 Iraqi civilians had died as a result of the war and occupation.

The dynamics of the fighting between the resistance and the U.S., and the horrific human costs that are being unleashed, are unlikely to change in the near term. Both parts of the Bush administration's two-pronged plan, staging elections and putting Iraqis in charge of their own security, are failing because of the occupation.

Peace activists in the U.S. and around the world support elections as one component of democratization. But not every election is legitimate or democratic. An election cannot be legitimate when it is conducted under foreign military occupation and during war. As currently planned, the January 30 elections in Iraq are designed to provide a veneer of credibility and legitimacy to the continuation of U.S. control of Iraq. The U.S. hopes they will lead to the election of a U.S.-friendly government that will welcome U.S. military bases in Iraq, all legitimized through the drafting of a U.S.-style constitution.

Certainly Iraqis need to be in charge of their own security. But that can only happen in a truly sovereign nation. U.S. officials dismantled the existing security forces on May 17, 2003, soon after invading Iraq. But the Iraqi police and military forces the U.S. is trying to create have 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 greatest risk. At the same time, soldiers and police officers lack adequate train-

ing. 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. U.S.-sponsored Iraqi security forces cannot succeed as long as the U.S. is leading a war on the ground in Iraq.

Iraqi history provides some useful lessons. The British ruled Iraq, officially, under a League of Nations mandate from 1922 until 1932, and unofficially through pro-British generals and the monarchy from 1932 until the 1958 revolution. Their emphasis was on controlling Iraq's oil through a strong, pro-British military. The resulting primacy of the military within Iraqi society helped set the political stage for the ascendancy of the Iraqi Ba'ath party and eventually that of Saddam Hussein. Making a priority out of building up Iraq's military and police capacity may look attractive at the moment, but in the longer term it may signal new problems.

As with any guerrilla war, the Iraqi resistance is unlikely to be defeated by military means. Political and diplomatic solutions must be the key components to change the terrible situation Iraqis are in today.

What Will Happen When the U.S. Troops Are Withdrawn?

No one can say with certainty what will happen when U.S. troops leave. But if the administration continues to "Stay the Course" U.S. troops will continue to die and they will continue to kill. Iraq's reconstruction will remain stalled. Any election held under conditions of foreign military occupation and any resulting Iraqi "government" will remain illegitimate. Regional governments will stay paralyzed. And the country's overall situation will remain dire.

While there is no absolute certainty about all the consequences of full withdrawal, likely developments can be anticipated. The resistance is multi-faceted. It includes an amalgam of Iraqi nationalists, democratic and otherwise, outraged by the illegal foreign occupation of their country. Some are disgruntled former Ba'athists. Others are Iraqi Islamists, both Shia and Sunni, holding a range of religious views who see fighting the U.S. occupation of Iraq as both a national and religious obligation. And some are foreign

fighters, allied with some Iraqis, apparently mostly extreme fundamentalist Islamists, who see an opportunity to transform Iraq into part of an Islamic caliphate.

To the extent that the resistance is unified at all among its disparate ethnic, religious, and political sectors, the unity appears limited to a shared opposition to the U.S. occupation. Without the occupation as an outside enemy, those much smaller sectors of the resistance that are motivated largely by religious extremism and who are responsible for some of the worst violence against civilians, will likely become isolated from the broader sectors of the resistance. One probable result will be a significant reduction—though not an immediate end—of violence, with the departure of the key targets of the violence, the U.S. occupation and its Iraqi supporters.

It is likely that the withdrawal of U.S. troops would lead to the collapse of at least some parts of the current U.S.-imposed "government" of Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, but some of its institutions, including the police, the military, and other security agencies, could well survive with different people, untainted by association with the U.S. occupation, emerging from within them to assert new leadership. And without an outside enemy occupying the country, it is also more likely that the kind of secular nationalism long dominant in Iraq would again prevail as the most influential (though certainly not sole) political force in the emerging Iraqi polity, as opposed to the virulent Islamist tendencies currently on the rise among Iraqis facing the desperation of occupation, repression, and growing impoverishment.

A Plan for Withdrawal: Policy Directions for the U.S.

In the period between the announcement of a date certain for troop withdrawal and the completion of the actual withdrawal:

The U.S. Military Should:

Cease all offensive actions and depart from population centers. While moving out of the country altogether, U.S. troops should immediately redeploy toward the Iraqi borders, where Iraqi troops

in a reconstituted Iraqi army, including most of the former soldiers demobilized by Paul Bremer, would work to secure the borders. The actual U.S. withdrawal should be carried out as quickly as possible to minimize the dangers for both U.S. troops and Iraqi civilians who may be endangered by continuing violence.

Close the 14 or more permanent and/or long-term military bases the U.S. has established in Iraq. A parallel congressional resolution should assert the principle of non-interference and non-intervention for the U.S. in Iraq, and support the full and complete withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq.

The U.S. Administration Should:

Insist that the U.S.-dependent “interim government” in Iraq immediately postpone the scheduled January 30th national elections. Calls for postponement are already coming from Iraqi government officials, including the interim president, and numerous international and U.S. military officials. Once the U.S. troops are on their way out of the country, the UN should be encouraged, and provided with the requisite financial, political, and international military support, to work with Iraqi institutions to prepare elections for local and provincial governments within a brief period. The goal should be to allow an immediate devolution of local decisions, including humanitarian needs, education and reconstruction priorities, to local governments, while delaying the election of a national assembly and the beginnings of a national government until the U.S. occupation is completely ended.

Announce that the U.S. embassy in Baghdad will be reduced to “normal” size and authority. All U.S. advisers currently seconded to Iraqi ministries will be withdrawn. Once there is a truly independent government in place in Baghdad, the U.S. should pay for international advisers chosen by that government to assist in government ministries or other areas of work.

Declare that it has no intention of maintaining control, officially or through surrogates, over Iraq’s oil, oil fields, or oil production capacity. While the administration has announced this

before, the claim could never be taken seriously while the U.S. occupation remains in control of Iraq.

The Congress Should:

Cut off U.S. spending for the Iraq War, starting with a cut-off of Pentagon funding for all military costs except for direct personal protection of U.S. troops, such as body armor and vehicle armor, and transport costs for the withdrawal out of Iraq. That means a complete cut-off in weapons spending. Congress should refuse to debate the new supplemental spending bill, anticipated to be \$100 billion, until a detailed break-down of spending has been provided by the Pentagon so discussion can go line by line to identify and remove all spending not specifically for troop protection and troop withdrawal. That line-item breakdown discussion should involve the entire Congress, and not be limited to the Armed Services Committee and relevant sub-committees.

Halt the rampant war profiteering that has caused widespread waste, fraud, and abuse. As outlined below, that means passing legislation leading to cancellation of all existing contracts to U.S. firms, beginning with the no-bid and “cost-plus” contracts to White House-connected firms such as Bechtel and Halliburton. Future contracts will be limited to Iraqi companies.

Cancel or revoke all U.S.-issued contracts to U.S. and other foreign corporations working in Iraq. Iraqi contractors and Iraqi workers, with regional (Jordanian, Egyptian, Gulf, etc.) assistance if needed, will immediately be contracted for payment from the funds available from the Iraq Development Fund and the new U.S.-financed Reparations and Reconstruction fund. The model for this reconstruction work should be the indigent Iraqi effort in 1991 that rebuilt the Desert Storm-devastated infrastructure in less than one year.

Ensure that all Iraqi funds—including oil revenues and money from previously frozen accounts—are removed from U.S. government control and returned to Iraqi control as soon as a truly independent, post-occupation government is function-

ing. Until that time, the UN should control those international accounts.

Congress and the Administration Jointly Should:

Return any funds remaining in the U.S.-controlled Development Fund for Iraq to Iraq as soon as a truly independent government, created only after the U.S. withdrawal, is functioning. The fund, created from Iraqi oil (including Oil for Food funds) and other assets seized by the U.S. invasion forces in spring 2003 as well as frozen accounts transferred from other countries to U.S. control, has so far paid for virtually all of the U.S.-controlled reconstruction projects in Iraq. In the meantime the United Nations, rather than the U.S., will manage the fund.

Create a U.S.-financed multi-billion dollar fund for reparations and reconstruction in Iraq. Initial control of that fund should be placed in the hands of the United Nations, with the clear understanding that it will be turned over to Iraqi control as soon as a post-occupation independent government is functioning.

Announce that debt cancellation for Iraq will not be dependent on Iraqi acceptance of IMF-imposed structural adjustment programs or other austerity measures aimed at forcibly privatizing and liberalizing Iraq's economy. All decisions regarding the trajectory of Iraq's post-war economy will remain in Iraqi hands.

A Plan for "Internationalizing the Peace"

The obligations of U.S., British, Australian, and other "coalition" members to Iraq go far beyond the withdrawal of U.S. and "coalition" troops and the end of the illegal occupation. The U.S. in particular owes a massive financial debt to Iraq. Over time that obligation must be to repay Iraq for the cost of the collapse of their economy as a result of the U.S.-orchestrated 1990-2003 economic sanctions; for the damage of the 2003-2005 invasion and occupation; and promised U.S. reconstruction funds far beyond the pittance so far released.

Internationalizing the peace means that after the war the U.S. must accept primary responsibility for

supporting—financially and diplomatically, but without exerting control—a truly international campaign to help reconstruct Iraq. That campaign will largely be centered in the regional (Arab League and Organization of the Islamic Conference) and multi-lateral organizations (United Nations, including UN Development Program for reconstruction assistance and Department of Peacekeeping Operations for temporary security help).

The initial UN estimate for repair of war damage to Iraq, not including reconstruction from sanctions-caused damage, was \$200 billion. With the additional damage of recent months, particularly the destruction of Fallujah, Washington must be prepared to fund all of those projects, with British, Australian, and other coalition help, paying at least the equivalent to what the U.S. and its allies have paid to destroy Iraq.

But paying for the full cost of Iraq's reconstruction does not give the U.S. the right to control how those funds are used, nor to keep U.S. or "coalition" soldiers, U.S. military contractors, or U.S. corporations on the ground in Iraq. The principle must be that Iraqi workers and companies are the primary recipients of U.S. funds, and only those Iraqi entities would have the right to subcontract or recruit regional or broader international assistance based on their own assessment of needs.

Minimize Chances of Civil War

The most important step toward preventing civil war requires withdrawing U.S. troops from Iraq, and thus diminishing the overall level of violence by removing its primary target. It is unlikely, however, that the violence will completely disappear with the end of the occupation, or that the Iraqi military can rebuild itself instantly as U.S. troops are withdrawn. As a result, there will be a need for international assistance—including some temporary kind of peacekeeping and/or security assistance until Iraq's own security forces become viable. That temporary on-the-ground security assistance cannot be imposed by U.S. (or U.S.-led "coalition") forces. Truly multilateral regional and international organizations must provide it.

A combination of United Nations blue helmet peacekeepers, along with temporary forces accountable to the Arab League and/or the Organization of the Islamic Conference would 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.

Washington rejected a recent offer from Saudi Arabia to help create a regional force in Iraq. But clearly there is willingness from other countries in the region to get involved. Since the U.S. went into Iraq with no plan to secure the support of neighboring states, despite the fact that one of the claimed goals of invasion was "spreading democracy" in the Middle East, it is not surprising that the war and occupation have significantly increased regional antagonism toward the U.S. Additionally, persistent U.S. hostility toward Iran continues to hurt the prospects for post-occupation regional cooperation. Once the Iraq occupation ends, though not before, U.S. efforts to repair its damaged standing in the region might have a chance of success. A serious U.S. effort to support regional (the Arab League and the OIC, which includes both Iran and Turkey) and international efforts, without controlling them, would be an important start.

Looking Forward

All possible scenarios in today's war-ravaged Iraq pose potential risks. Having waged an illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq, the U.S. has no good options. Maintaining the U.S. occupation, with U.S. troops killing and dying in Iraq, violates U.S. and international law, as well as the UN Charter and the Geneva Conventions. Clearly this is not the way forward.

Withdrawing U.S. troops, and ending the occupation, is the only option that puts the U.S. back on the side of the rule of law, and gives the people of Iraq the best chance of rebuilding their devastated country and moving toward peace, justice, and security.

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